

AROUND The WORLD



WEDNESDAYS @ 10:10am
EAST FOUR DAY ROOM

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Colombia

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Colombia
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Bogotá
- **POPULATION:** 48,168,996
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Spanish
- **MONEY:** Peso
- **AREA:** 439,619 square miles (1,138,910 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Andes, Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Magdalena, Cauca, Atrato, Sinú



LEFT: COLOMBIAN FLAG



RIGHT: COLOMBIAN PESO

Photograph by Max Blain, Dreamstime

HISTORY

Archaeologists think the first people to arrive in Colombia came about 20,000 years ago. Some 8,000 years after that, settlers in the Magdalena Valley in the western part of the country grew into a civilization called the Chibcha. From the Chibcha arose the Muisca, an advanced culture that became the dominant power in Colombia by A.D. 700.

Spanish explorers arrived in Colombia in 1500 but didn't establish a settlement until 1525. These settlers were obsessed with finding gold and other valuables, and by 1538 they had conquered the Muisca and stolen all their gold and jewels. Colombia remained under Spanish rule for nearly 250 years.

By the late 1700s, people in Colombia had grown tired of Spanish rule. In 1811, the city of Cartagena declared independence and Bogotá soon followed. Spanish soldiers tried to reclaim control in 1815, but Colombian forces led by the famed Venezuelan general Simón Bolívar defeated the Spanish in 1819.

After independence, Colombia became part of a large country called New Granada. This country fell apart by 1835, and Colombia became a separate nation. Fights soon broke out between political groups over who would lead the country. Since then, Colombia has had several civil wars and relatively few times of peace.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Colombia's people are as varied as its landscape. Most citizens are descended from three ethnic groups: Indians, African people brought to Colombia to work as slaves, and European settlers. This rich cultural mix makes the country's foods, music, dance, and art diverse and unique.

GEOGRAPHY



Colombia is nicknamed the "gateway to South America" because it sits in the northwestern part of the continent where South America connects with Central and North America. It is the fifth largest country in Latin America and home to the world's second largest population of Spanish-speaking people.

Colombia is a land of extremes. Through its center run the towering, snow-covered volcanoes and mountains of the Andes. Tropical beaches line the north and west. And there are deserts in the north and vast grasslands, called Los Llanos, in the east.

Dense forests fill Colombia's Amazon Basin, which takes up nearly the country's entire southern half. In northwest Colombia, a warm, wet, jungle-filled area called the Chocó reaches across the Panama border.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

With its vast rain forests, sprawling savannas, huge mountains, and 1,800 miles (2,900 kilometers) of coastline on two oceans, Colombia is one of the most biologically diverse countries on Earth. Even though it takes up less than one percent of the world's land area, about 10 percent of all animal species live in Colombia.

Much of Colombia's forest habitats have been undisturbed for many millions of years. This has given wildlife a chance to evolve into many different species. Animals from jaguars to caimans to poison dart frogs all call Colombia's jungles home. The mountains provide habitat for huge Andean condors and rare spectacled bears, South America's only bear species.

Thousands of years ago, Colombia was nearly completely covered in jungle. But people have cleared most of the trees to create farmland, and now only a handful of areas have their original forests. The government has set up several national parks to protect habitats, but damage to the environment continues.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Colombia has a long history of democracy. Like the United States, the country is run by a president, who is elected every four years. Laws are made by a House of Representatives and a Senate.

Colombia's biggest trading partner is the United States, which buys 40 percent of the country's exports. Colombia sends a variety of items overseas, including coffee, bananas, oil, coal, gold, platinum, and emeralds.

One of Colombia's worst exports, though, is illegal drugs. With help from the United States, the Colombian government is carrying out Plan Colombia, a costly and wide-ranging effort to rid the country of the gangs, called cartels, that produce illegal drugs for sale around the world.

Morocco

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Kingdom of Morocco
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Rabat
- **POPULATION:** 34,314,130
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Arabic, Berber dialects, French
- **MONEY:** Moroccan Dirham
- **AREA:** 172,000 square miles (447,000 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Atlas, Rif
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Draa



LEFT: FLAG OF MOROCCO

RIGHT: MOROCCAN DIRHAMS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TYPHOONSKI, DREAMSTIME



HISTORY

Morocco is just across the Strait of Gibraltar from [Spain](#). From 1912 to 1956 the country was divided into [French](#) and Spanish zones—two small Spanish-controlled areas, Ceuta and Melilla still remain today.

King Mohammed VI, who has ruled since 1999, claims descent from the Prophet Muhammad.

Morocco is one of only three kingdoms left on the continent of Africa—the others, Lesotho and Swaziland, are small, southern African countries.

GOVERNMENT

The chief of state in Morocco is King Mohammed VI and he has ruled since 1999. Prime Minister Abbas el Fassi was appointed by the king. The king is involved in all decisions and he has moved the country closer to democracy, but it is still a long way from the democracies of Europe and North America. Morocco is a Muslim state and the legal system is based on Islamic law.

GEOGRAPHY



Morocco is located in the northwest corner of Africa and is bordered by the North Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Algeria and Western Sahara are the land borders to the south and east. Morocco is about the same size as [California](#).

The high Atlas Mountains separate the mild coastline from the harsh Sahara. Rainfall is unpredictable and is not enough to supply all the water needed for the people.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Moroccans are Berber and Arab and most of the people are Muslim. The Berbers have been in North Africa for centuries. Many of the Berber people live in the mountains and still speak the Berber language, but today they are moving to cities to find work.

Moroccans enjoy drinking mint tea sweetened with sugar. The people take their time making tea and sipping it with family and guests. In the cities, the pace is a bit faster than in the countryside. Fifty-seven percent of the people live in cities such as Fez, Casablanca, and Marrakech, on the coastal plain.

Mosques with beautiful towers called minarets, and bazaars are common in Morocco. Medinas are the old medieval section of cities. Old fortresses called kasbahs are strong buildings built from palm-tree fibers and mud from the riverbanks.

Children are required to be in school from ages 7-15, but many children work with their parents and are not able to attend school. Many girls don't ever receive an education.

NATURE

[Elephants](#) and [lions](#) once wandered around Morocco, but they are gone forever. [Reptiles](#) like [geckos](#), snakes, and [chameleons](#) are common, but most large [mammals](#) have disappeared. Today the most common are camels, sheep, goats, the Barbary macaque monkey, and wild boar.

The desert fox, desert hedgehog, and jerboa inhabit the desert. Olive trees grow across the flat plains and evergreen oaks and giant cedars are common in the woods on the mountains.

Libya

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** State of Libya
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Interim government in transition
- **CAPITAL:** Tripoli
- **POPULATION:** 6,754,507
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Arabic (English and Italian are also commonly spoken)
- **MONEY:** Libyan dinar
- **AREA:** 647,183 square miles (1,759,540 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Tibesti, Acacus, Nafusa, Akhdar



HISTORY

Libya was first settled by the Berbers during the Late Bronze Age, around 1200 B.C. They were followed by the Phoenicians, an ancient Mediterranean civilization, who established coastal trading posts in the 7th century B.C. The Greeks later arrived in the eastern part of the country and gave the region its name: Libya. The Romans then conquered Libya and ruled the territory. Around the year 700 A.D., the Arabs took over and introduced Islam to the area.

Beginning in the 16th century, the Ottoman Empire ruled Libya for several hundred years. First formed in 1299, the Ottoman Empire ruled a large portion of Eastern Europe and the Middle East for over 600 years. (The empire fell apart in 1923 and became the country of [Turkey](#).)

The Ottoman Empire's reign in Libya lasted until Italy seized control of the country in 1912. The Italian rule lasted just 31 years and ended when the [French](#) and [British](#) liberated Libya during World War II in 1943. Libya officially gained its independence in 1951.

The country was ruled by monarchs until Colonel Muammar Gaddafi overthrew King Idris I in 1969. Gaddafi controlled Libya until the 2011 revolution, when he was killed in the early stages of the civil war. The country continues to rebuild its government today.

GOVERNMENT

Libya's government is currently in transition. It was a monarchy until 1969, when rebels overthrew King Idris I and turned the country into an authoritarian state, or a country with one or few leaders and no constitution to protect the people's rights. A council ruled the country until 1977, when Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, one of the leaders of the 1969 revolution and a council member, became the country's "Brother Leader," or unofficial ruler.

Beginning in 2010, protests spread across many North African and Middle Eastern countries in what became known as the Arab Spring. The unrest spread to Libya, and Gaddafi punished many of the protesters. His response caused a civil war and he was killed in 2011. A transitional council was created to help form a unified government in Libya.

The Libyan economy is almost entirely based on oil and gas sales, and it's a major global oil producer. The civil war, however, reduced the value of Libya's currency, the dinar, and the economy still struggles today.

NATURE

Most of Libya is covered by desert, and its plants and wildlife reflect the arid conditions. Hyenas, fennec foxes, jackals, and gazelles roam the desert, and [snakes](#), including venomous adders and kraits, slither throughout the country.

Some strips of land near the Libyan coast support native [forests](#) of pine, juniper, and cypress. The country's coastline is also home to several rare wildlife species. [Loggerhead turtles](#) and Egyptian tortoises nest on the country's beaches and share the water with many types of dolphins, including the striped dolphin. Saker falcons and marbled polecats are often spotted close to the coast.

Libya has established several national parks, natural reserves, and protected areas, including two marine refuges. The country's largest national park is El Kouf National Park, which is known for its sand dunes, wetlands, and hilly terrain. The park is home to Egyptian wolves, golden eagles, [red foxes](#), [flamingos](#), and other wildlife.



GEOGRAPHY



Tripoli, Libya's capital and largest city, is located near the coast.
PHOTOGRAPH BY VYACHESLAV ARGENBERG / GETTY IMAGES

The fourth-largest country in Africa, Libya is bigger than the state of [Alaska](#). The country borders the Mediterranean Sea to the north, Tunisia and Algeria to the west, Niger and Chad to the south, and Sudan and Egypt to the east.

Libya is almost entirely covered by the Libyan Desert, a flat plateau that's part of the Sahara, the world's largest hot desert. Libya is so dry that no permanent rivers flow through its boundaries. Water may flow beneath the ground and occasionally seep aboveground into dry streambeds called [wadis](#).

To access the water below the desert, Libya built the Great Man-Made River, a network of underground pipelines that deliver fresh water to the cities. Upon its completion in 1991, the "river" became the largest permanently flowing water source in Libya.

Most of Libya's population lives in cities along the Mediterranean Sea, where the climate is milder than the country's hot desert interior. The capital of Tripoli and Benghazi, the second-largest city, are both located near the coast.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

The Berber and Arab ethnic groups make up about 97 percent of the country's population. The Berbers are considered the earliest inhabitants of the country and are thought to have arrived in Libya around 1200 B.C. Arabs began to settle in the country around 700 A.D., following the rise in popularity of the religion of Islam. Small populations of [Greeks](#), [Egyptians](#), and [Italians](#) live in the country as well.

Today, most Libyans speak the Arabic language, and nearly 97 percent of the country is Muslim, or followers of Islam. A small percentage of the population are Roman Catholics or Orthodox Christians.

Almost 25 percent of Libyans live in Tripoli or Benghazi. Outside of these urban centers, rural Libyans farm near desert oases, where they can access water. Deeper into the desert, animal herders follow the weather and tend to sheep, goats, and camels.

Weaving, embroidery, and metal engraving are popular arts in Libya. Other common activities include horse racing, folk dancing, and soccer, the most popular sport in Libya. Both Tripoli and Benghazi have many teams that locals enjoy watching.

Egypt

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Arab Republic of Egypt
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Cairo
- **POPULATION:** 99,413,317
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Arabic
- **MONEY:** Egyptian pound
- **AREA:** 386,662 square miles (1,001,449 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Eastern Highlands

MAJOR RIVERS: Nile



LEFT: EGYPTIAN FLAG, RIGHT: EGYPTIAN POUND Photograph by Roy Pedersen, Dreamstime

HISTORY

The first people to live on the banks of the Nile were hunters and fishermen, who settled there over 8,000 years ago. They learned to grow crops and raise animals, and they began to build villages and towns. They traded with their neighbors and learned to sail boats. By 3000 B.C., a civilization was established.

Around 3100 B.C., the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were unified under a powerful king, later called a pharaoh. These kings built huge pyramids, temples, and other monuments. They also conquered other lands.

By 1000 B.C., Egypt had split into smaller parts and the kingdom was in decline. Strong neighbors attacked and took over Egyptian territory. In 31 B.C., Egypt fell under Roman control. In A.D. 640, Muslim warriors took over Egypt and founded the modern capital, Cairo. They ruled for several centuries. In the 16th century, Egypt became part of the Ottoman Turkish Empire.

European powers played an increasing role in Egypt starting in the late 18th century. In 1882, the British invaded and occupied Egypt. The British wanted control of the Suez Canal, which linked the Mediterranean Sea with the Red Sea and greatly shortened the sailing trip from Asia to Europe. Egypt gained full independence from Great Britain in 1952 and took control of the Suez Canal in 1956.

Egypt and other neighboring Arab countries fought a series of wars with the Jewish state of Israel into the 1970s. In 1979 Egypt and Israel signed a peace agreement.

In 2011, a popular uprising toppled Egypt's long-time president, Hosni Mubarek. The country has held several democratic elections since 2011, but the role of the military in government remains strong.

GEOGRAPHY



Without the Nile River, all of Egypt would be desert. Only about an inch (2.5 centimeters) of rain falls throughout Egypt each year. But each summer, the river rises because of rains at its source far to the south in Ethiopia. Floods cover the river's valleys, leaving sediments needed for trees, plants, and crops to grow.

Egypt is often divided into two sections: Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north. The sections are named this way because the Nile flows from south to north. The river empties into the Mediterranean Sea.

Southern Egypt's landscape contains low mountains and desert. Northern Egypt has wide valleys near the Nile and desert to the east and west. North of Cairo, the capital, is the sprawling, triangular Nile River Delta. This fertile land is completely covered with farms.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Egypt's geography, population, history, and military strength have made it highly influential in the region. Egypt is a democratic republic, although some critics claim that it is not truly democratic. Until 2005, there was never more than one presidential candidate to vote for.

Along with oil and gas exports, Egypt's tourism industry remains a key part of its economy. Visitors flock to the country to see ancient monuments like the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx. And to learn about Ancient Egyptian rulers like King Tutankhamun.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

About 90 percent of Egyptians are Muslim, which means they are followers of the Islamic religion. About 10 percent of Egyptians are Copts, one of the oldest branches of the Christian religion.

Egypt's population is growing rapidly. This puts strains on Egypt's resources, since most people live in a narrow strip of land along the Nile River. Having so many people in such a small area can cause overcrowding, from schools to apartment buildings to hospitals.

Children are highly valued in Egypt, especially in rural areas where they help on family farms. Children are also expected to look after their parents in their old age.

NATURE

Egypt is home to a wide variety of animals and plants, including jackals, gazelles, crocodiles, and cobras. The best places to see Egypt's wildlife are in its more than 20 protected regions, which include oases, deserts, mountains, coastal areas, river islands, and wetlands.

Egyptians have always been close to the natural world. The ancient Egyptians left paintings and carvings of large animals like elephants, hippos, leopards, and cheetahs. These animals were once common in Egypt, but they are now rare or extinct because of hunting and habitat loss.

Tanzania

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** United Republic of Tanzania
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPTIAL:** Dar es Salaam (administrative captial), Dodoma (legislative capital)
- **AREA:** 365,755 square miles (947,300 square kilometers)
- **POPULATION:** 55,451,343
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Kiswahili or Swahili, English
- **MONEY:** Tanzanian shilling



LEFT: TANZANIAN FLAG, RIGHT: TANZANIAN SHILLING Photograph by Wiktor Wojtas, Dreamstime

HISTORY

After Tanganyika and Zanzibar became independent countries, they merged in 1964 to form the nation of Tanzania. Tanzania is the world's largest producer of cloves.

Olduvai Gorge in northern Tanzania is the location of the oldest human settlements found by Louis and Mary Leakey. This area is often called "The Cradle of Civilization."

PEOPLE & CULTURE

About 90 percent of Tanzanians live in rural areas and live off what they can grow on the land. Tanzania's early people were hunters and gatherers. Traders moved to the country in about A.D. 800. The native people married the newcomers from India, Arabia, and the Shirazis from Persia. Their language, Kiswahili, spread to other East African areas.

There are about 120 African tribal groups in Tanzania. Arranged marriage is still customary for many Tanzanian families and parents start planning for their daughter's future when she is young.

Parts of the country are infested with the tsetse fly. This blood sucking insect carries sleeping sickness, which affects humans and livestock. While the government has tried to eliminate the flies, many areas are not safe for humans or their animals. Malaria is always a threat in the country. Soccer is the favorite sport in Tanzania.

GEOGRAPHY



Tanzania is the largest country in East Africa and includes the islands of Zanzibar, Pemba, and Mafia. About twice the size of California, this African country is bordered by the Indian Ocean and eight countries: Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, Zambia, Malawi, and Mozambique.

Mount Kilimanjaro, once an active volcano, is the highest point in Africa and is bordered by three of the largest lakes on the continent: Lake Victoria (the world's second-largest freshwater lake) in the north, Lake Tanganyika in the west, and Lake Nyasa in the southwest.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

Most of the land was once savanna and bush, but today is semidesert. There is an abundance of wildlife in Tanzania. The largest remaining elephant populations in the world are in Tanzania's Selous Game Reserve, but they are still being killed for their ivory tusks.

Some of the most well-known African mammal species are native to Tanzania: wildebeest, zebra, giraffe, elephant, rhino, lion, and leopard. They are endangered due to poaching. Crocodiles and hippopotamuses can be found along riverbanks and lakeshores, and giant turtles live off the coast.

The Gombe Stream National Park is a well-known chimpanzee sanctuary where Jane Goodall did research on chimps in their natural habitat. Serengeti National Park is Tanzania's oldest and most popular park for tourists. It is linked to the Masai Mara Game Reserve in Kenya and is home to over 1.7 million wildebeest, and about a million other animals.

GOVERNMENT

The president is the head of the country and chief of the armed services. General elections are held once every five years. Zanzibar also has its own president, assembly, ministry, and makes its own laws. Zanzibar is wealthier than the rest of the country.

Dar es Salaam is the administrative capital, but Dodoma will be the future capital and is home to Tanzania's legislature.

South Africa

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of South Africa
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITALS:** Pretoria (administrative), Cape Town (legislative), Bloemfontein (judicial)
- **POPULATION:** 55,380,210
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isiXhosa, isiZulu, Northern Sotho, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga
- **MONEY:** Rand
- **AREA:** 470,693 square miles (1,219,089 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Drakensberg
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Limpopo, Orange



LEFT: SOUTH AFRICA FLAG, RIGHT: SOUTH AFRICAN RAND Photograph by Asafta, Dreamstime

HISTORY

In northern South Africa near Johannesburg, there is a cave formation called the Sterkfontein. Within these caves, archaeologists have uncovered some of the earliest human fossils ever found. Some are more than two million years old. The find earned the region the nickname "Cradle of Humankind."

About 24,000 years ago, tribes of hunter-gatherers known as the San, or Bushmen, began moving into South Africa. Many San still live, much as their ancestors did, around the Kalahari Desert in the northwest.

In the 1400s, European ships heading to the Far East began stopping on the South African coast for supplies. In 1652, the Netherlands established the southern city of Cape Town, and Dutch farmers, called Boers, began settling in the areas around the city.

In 1806, wars in Europe left the British in control of the Cape Town colony. In 1910, the British united four colonies in the region and created South Africa. They established laws that separated whites from black South Africans, a practice of segregation called apartheid, which led to decades of conflict.

In 1963, Nelson Mandela, head of the anti-apartheid African National Congress, was given a life sentence in jail for "terrorist" activities. In 1990, after 27 years behind bars, he was freed by President F.W. de Klerk. In 1994, Mandela was elected president of South Africa and served until 1999.

GEOGRAPHY



Most of South Africa's landscape is made up of high, flat areas called plateaus. These lands are covered with rolling grasslands, called highveld, and tree-dotted plains called bushveld.

To the east, south, and west of the plateau lands is a mountainous region called the Great Escarpment. The eastern range, called the Drakensberg, or Dragon's Mountain, is filled with jagged peaks, some more than 11,400 feet (3,475 meters) high.

Interestingly, South Africa has another country within its borders. Nestled in the Drakensberg is the mountainous kingdom of Lesotho. Much of South Africa's water comes from the snowcapped peaks of this tiny, landlocked nation.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

South Africa has been a democratic republic since holding its first truly open election on April 27, 1994. Natural resources, agriculture, tourism, and manufacturing have made South Africa the largest economy on the continent. But problems with unemployment, poverty, and AIDS present huge challenges for the government.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Many different peoples make up South Africa, each with their own language and history. The country has 11 official languages and many more unofficial ones. This colorful mix of cultures gives South Africa its nickname "rainbow nation."

South Africans are passionate about music, often using song and dance to express social and political ideas. They're also known worldwide for their skill in sports, including rugby, cricket, golf, and soccer. In 2010, South Africa became the first African nation to host the World Cup.

NATURE

From aardvarks to zebras, South Africa is full of wildlife. The country takes up only about one percent of Earth's land surface, but is home to almost 10 percent of the world's known bird, fish, and plant species and about 6 percent of its mammal and reptile species.

The seas around South Africa are also crowded with wildlife. About 2,000 marine species visit South African waters at some point during the year. There's also a world-famous sardine run off the east coast each June that draws thousands of hungry sharks, dolphins, and birds.

South Africa works to preserve its wildlife with dozens of protected land and marine areas, including the famous Kruger National Park in the north, as well as nearly 9,000 privately-owned game reserves throughout the country.

Nevertheless, many of South Africa's animals are hurt by illegal hunting and loss of habitat, and dozens of species are in danger of extinction, including the black rhinoceros, the cheetah, and the African wild dog.

Peru

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Peru
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional republic
- **CAPITAL:** Lima
- **POPULATION:** 31,331,228
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Spanish, Quechua
- **MONEY:** Nuevo Sol
- **AREA:** 496,224 square miles (1,285,216 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Andes
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Amazon, Ucayali, Madre de Dios



LEFT: PERUVIAN FLAG, RIGHT: NUEVO SOL Photograph by Asafta, Dreamstime

HISTORY

Peru is a very old country. The earliest inhabitants arrived there about 15,000 years ago. Societies emerged on the west coast more than 5,000 years ago and began to spread inland. These included the Chavín, the Moche, and the Nasca.

One of the most important Peruvian cultures was the Inca, who lived in Peru around 600 years ago. Their capital, Cusco, is still a major city today. The Inca also built Machu Picchu, a famous and mysterious ancient city in the Andes. They thrived for centuries before being conquered by the Spanish in 1532.

NATURE

Because it has so many different ecosystems, Peru is home to a wider variety of plants and animals than most other countries on Earth. For many reasons, Peruvians have not had as much of an impact on their natural world as many other countries, and much of these ecosystems have been undisturbed.

A 250-acre (100-hectare) plot of Peruvian rain forest is home to more than 6,000 kinds of plants! There are hundreds of species that are only found in the Amazon. To protect these plants and animals, Peru has created special forest areas called reserves.

On the Pacific Coast, many interesting plant and animal species have adapted to the dry desert climate. And off the coast, the Peru Current nourishes huge numbers of small fish, which in turn support large populations of bigger fish and seabirds, including Humboldt penguins.

Peru's mountains support special types of grasses and plants, which provide food for mammals like llamas, alpacas, and vicuñas. One plant that grows in the Andes, the puya raimondi, grows for a hundred years before blooming.

GEOGRAPHY



Peru is the third largest country in South America, after Brazil and Argentina. It is made up of a variety of landscapes, from mountains and beaches to deserts and rain forests. Most people live along the coast of the Pacific Ocean, where the capital, Lima, is located.

Along Peru's west coast is a narrow strip of desert 1,555 miles (2,500 kilometers) long. Ancient people, called the Chimú and the Nasca, first inhabited this region thousands of years ago. The coastal desert makes up only about 10 percent of Peru, but it is home to more than half of all Peruvians.

The world's largest rain forest, the Amazon, covers nearly half of Peru. Called the selva in Spanish, this huge jungle, which also covers half of Brazil, is home to plants and animals that do not live anywhere else on Earth. Some scientists think there may even be Indian tribes there that have never seen the outside world.

The second highest mountain range in the world runs through Peru. These peaks, called the Andes, are so tall and forbidding that the ancient Inca people thought they were gods. They run from north to south and can be seen from Peru's beaches 50 miles (80 kilometers) to the west. The highest peak, Mount Huascarán, is 22,205 feet (6,768 meters) high.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Peru is a constitutional republic, with a president, a congress, and a supreme court. Peruvians are required to vote by law. Presidents serve five-year terms and can only be elected twice in a row.

Peru is one of the richest countries in the world in terms of natural resources. Gold, silver, copper, zinc, lead, and iron are found across the country, and there are reserves of oil and natural gas. Even so, jobs there can be very hard to find, and Peru remains one of the world's poorest countries.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

The people of Peru are a mix of many different cultures, including Indians, Spaniards and other Europeans, descendants of African slaves, and Asians. Until recently, most people lived in the countryside. But now, more than 70 percent live in cities. Most Peruvians follow the Catholic religion introduced by the Spanish.

Spain

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Kingdom of Spain
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Madrid
- **POPULATION:** 49,331,076
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Castilian Spanish, Basque, Catalan, and Galician
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 195,363 square miles (505,988 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Pyrenees, Sierra de Guadarrama, Sierra de Gredos, Sierra Nevada
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Guadalquivir, Ebro, Duero, Miño, Tajo, and Gadiana



LEFT: SPANISH FLAG



RIGHT: EURO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMSTIME

HISTORY

Settlers have migrated to Spain from Europe, Africa, and the Mediterranean since the dawn of history. The Phoenicians, who came in the 8th century B.C., called the peninsula "Span," or hidden land. By the first century B.C. the Romans had conquered Spain.

Spain became mostly Christian under the Romans, who were followed by the Vandals and the Visigoths, Germanic peoples from Europe. The Visigoth rulers fought among themselves, and in A.D. 711 Muslims from Africa invaded Spain.

Islamic culture spread across Spain as Muslim rulers introduced new crops and irrigation systems, and trading increased. Mathematics, medicine, and philosophy became more advanced, peaking in the tenth century—the golden age of Islamic rule in Spain.

In 1492 Christian kingdoms in northern Spain conquered the Muslims and spread the Catholic religion. Enriched by silver from the Americas, Spain grew more powerful. It later lost land and power in the Napoleonic Wars, which ended in 1815.

More than 500,000 people died in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. The victorious Gen. Francisco Franco ruled as a brutal dictator until his death in 1975. Soon after, Spain began to transform itself into a modern, industrial, and democratic European nation.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

In Spain, which is a parliamentary monarchy, the king and the elected president share the power. Although there is a national parliament, Spain is one of the most decentralized democracies in Europe. Each of its 17 regions manages its own schools, hospitals, and other public services.

With vibrant, historic cities and sunny beaches, Spain attracts more tourists than any other European country except France. Services to the tourism industry drive Spain's economy, the eighth largest in the world. In 1986 Spain joined the European Community and further modernized its economy. Important industries include mining, shipbuilding, and textiles.



GEOGRAPHY

Spain occupies most of the Iberian Peninsula, stretching south from the Pyrenees Mountains to the Strait of Gibraltar, which separates Spain from Africa. To the east lies the Mediterranean Sea, including Spain's Balearic Islands. Spain also rules two cities in North Africa and the Canary Islands in the Atlantic.

The interior of Spain is a high, dry plateau surrounded and crisscrossed by mountain ranges. Rivers run to the coasts, creating good farmland. Still, the interior of the country gets very hot in summer and very cold and dry in the winter. Droughts are common.

Plants and trees grow so well on the northwestern coast, in Galicia and along the Bay of Biscay, that the area is called Green Spain. Rain, trapped by the mountains farther inland, is frequent. Beech and oak trees flourish here. Numerous coves and inlets break up the coastline.

The southern and eastern coasts of Spain, from the fertile Andalusian plain up to the Pyrenees, are often swept by warm winds called sirocco winds. These winds originate in northern Africa and keep temperatures along the Mediterranean coast milder than the interior.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Many Spaniards share a common ethnic background: a mixture of the early inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula, the Celts, and later conquerors from Europe and Africa. The origins of the Basque people in the north of Spain remain unknown. Recent immigrants from North Africa and Latin America have added to the mix.

Spaniards are known for their love of life and for eating and drinking with family and friends. Traditional appetizers like tapas or pintxos, the Basque country equivalent, are popular. Regional dances and music are almost as important as soccer and religious festivals.

NATURE

A link between Europe and Africa, Spain is an important resting spot for migratory birds. Spain is also home to such mammals as the wolf, lynx, wildcat, fox, wild boar, deer, hare, and wild goat. Streams and lakes shelter trout, barbel, and tench fish. But many species of wildlife face threats from habitat loss and pollution.

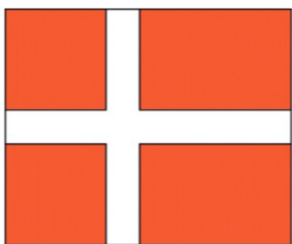
Due to centuries of tree cutting, large forests are now found only in the north Pyrenees and the Asturias-Galicia area. Planting new trees is difficult where sheep and goats graze. Erosion and river pollution are also problems. Spain has created many national parks and refuges, but they only cover about 7 percent of the country.

One protected area is Doñana National Park, a region of marshes, streams, and sand dunes where the Guadalquivir River flows into the Atlantic. The park's diversity of life is unique in Europe and includes the European badger, Egyptian mongoose, and endangered species such as the Spanish imperial eagle and the Iberian lynx.

Denmark

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Kingdom of Denmark
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Copenhagen
- **POPULATION:** 5,809,502
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Danish
- **MONEY:** Krone
- **AREA:** 16,638 square miles (43,094 square kilometers)



LEFT: DANISH FLAG, RIGHT: KRONE Photograph by Trovor, Dreamstime

HISTORY

People have lived in Denmark since the Stone Age, but there is evidence that people lived there around 50,000 B.C. In the 9th to 11th centuries, Viking warriors from Denmark and other Scandinavian countries raided Europe. Most of Denmark's modern cities were founded after the Viking era.

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden were united as the Union of Kalmar by Queen Margrethe in the late 14th century. Although Sweden broke away from the Union in 1523, Norway was ruled by Denmark until 1814.

During World War II, the governments of Germany and Denmark agreed that they would not attack each other, but Germany made a surprise attack on Denmark in 1940. Although the country was able to keep its own government at first, Germany took over in 1943.

GOVERNMENT

Denmark is a constitutional monarchy. Queen Margrethe II celebrated 40 years on the throne in January 2012. Denmark has the longest unbroken line of rulers in Europe. Queen Margrethe II can trace her ancestry back to King Gorm in the tenth century.

Although the Queen is the head of state, the prime minister is the head of the government. Denmark's Parliament has a single chamber called the Folketing, made up of 179 elected members.

GEOGRAPHY



Denmark is a country in northern Europe. It is made up of the Jutland Peninsula and more than 400 islands in the North Sea. It shares a border with Germany to the south. The country is almost two times the size of Massachusetts.

Denmark's terrain is mostly flat, with gently rolling hills. During the Ice Age, glaciers moved slowly across the landmass and shaped the country that exists today. Denmark has a long coastline with many lagoons, gulfs, and inlets. No part of Denmark is more than 32 miles (67 kilometers) from the sea.

Although Denmark is in northern Europe, the warm waters of the Gulf Stream make the climate mild.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

Denmark was once covered with trees, but almost all of the original forest has been chopped down. The largest mammal living in Denmark today is the red deer. There are about 300 species of birds in Denmark. During the summer, many different butterfly species can be found in Denmark.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

The people of Denmark are known as Danes. They are Nordic Scandinavians, many of which are blond, blue-eyed, and tall. In the southern part of the country, some people have German ancestry.

Danes have one of the highest standards of living in the world. All Danish families receive over \$1,500 each year for each child under 18 years old. About 85 percent of Danish people belong to the National Church of Denmark. The capital city of Copenhagen is home to more than 1 million people.

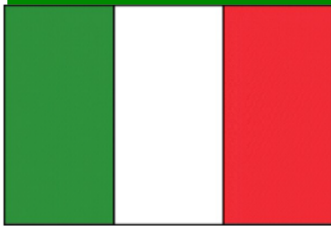
Open sandwiches called smørrebrød are a typical Danish lunch. These sandwiches are made of cold cuts, cheese, and spreads on a piece of dark, rye bread.

Danes often ride bicycles as a form of transportation.

Italy

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Italian Republic
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Rome
- **POPULATION:** 62,246,674
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Italian
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 116,324 square miles (301,277 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Alps, Apennines
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Po, Adige, Arno, Tiber



LEFT: ITALIAN FLAG



RIGHT: EUROS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMSTIME

HISTORY

Italy's location on the Mediterranean linked it with the trade routes of the ancient civilizations that developed in the region. With the city of Rome's rise to power, the Italian peninsula became the center of a huge empire that lasted for centuries. ([Learn about Ancient Rome.](#))

Italy's first societies emerged around 1200 B.C. Around 800 B.C. Greeks settled in the south and Etruscans arose in central Italy. By the sixth century B.C., the Etruscans had created a group of states called Etruria. Meanwhile, Latin and Sabine people south of Etruria merged to form a strong city-state called Rome.

Etruscan kings ruled Rome for nearly a hundred years. But Romans tossed out the Etruscans in 510 B.C. and went on to conquer the whole peninsula. They then set out to build a vast empire. At its greatest extent, in A.D. 117, the Roman Empire stretched from [Portugal](#) to Syria to Britain to North Africa.

The first sole emperor of Rome, Octavian, took power in 27 B.C. and took the name Augustus Caesar. For more than 400 years, the empire flourished. But by the fourth century A.D., it was in decline. In 395, the empire was split in two, and in 476, Germanic tribes from the north toppled the last emperor.

In the 12th century, Italian city-states began to rise again and grow rich on trade. But Italy remained a patchwork of territories, some of which were controlled by foreign dynasties. Beginning in 1859, an uprising forced the foreigners out, and in 1861, the Kingdom of Italy was proclaimed.

In 1914, Italy took the side of the United Kingdom and the [U.S.](#) in World War I, but was left in poverty at war's end. Benito Mussolini and his Fascist Party rose to power promising to restore the Roman Empire. He ruled as a dictator and entered World War II on the side of [Germany](#) and [Japan](#). He was later captured and executed.

GEOGRAPHY



Italy is a boot-shaped peninsula that juts out of southern Europe into the Adriatic Sea, Tyrrhenian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and other waters. Its location has played an important role in its history.

The sea surrounds Italy, and mountains crisscross the interior, dividing it into regions. The Alps cut across the top of the country and are streaked with long, thin glacial lakes. From the western end of the Alps, the Apennines mountains stretch south down the entire peninsula.

West of the Apennines are wooded hills that are home to many of Italy's historic cities, including Rome. In the south are hot, dry coastlands and fertile plains where olives, almonds, and figs are grown.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Since the rise of the Roman Empire, Italian art, architecture, and culture have had an influence around the world. Famed Italian painters include Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo. Italy is also at the heart of the Catholic Church, which is governed from Vatican City, a city-state surrounded by Rome.

The family is at the center of Italian society. Young people often live at home until they are in their 30s, even if they have a job. When parents retire, they often go to live with their children.

NATURE

For 22 centuries, Italians and their ancestors have cleared fields, grazed livestock, and hunted wild animals. Forests that once covered large areas are gone. But the country's remote places and many national parks still have wilderness largely untouched by humans.

The lower slopes of Italy's Alps are covered with forests. Above these woodlands are meadows that explode with specially adapted wildflowers in the spring. Throughout Italy, millions of [birds](#) stop to rest during their annual migration to Africa.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

In Italy, politics can often be exciting and noisy. Crowds gather in the streets to protest government policies or to show support for their party.

Since World War II, Italy has enjoyed an economic transformation. Industry grew, and by the mid-1960s, Italy had become one of the world's leading economies. Its main exports are clothing, shoes, food, and wine.

Portugal

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Portuguese Republic
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic, parliamentary democracy
- **CAPITAL:** Lisbon
- **POPULATION:** 10,355,493
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Portuguese, Mirandese
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 35,516 square miles (91,985 square kilometers)



LEFT: PORTUGUESE FLAG, RIGHT: EURO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMTIME

GEOGRAPHY



Portugal is the westernmost point of Europe and lies on the west coast of the Iberian Peninsula. The long Atlantic coastline is popular with visitors and locals alike. Surfers are drawn to the strong surf in the west, and the warm, sandy beaches in the south are a haven for tourists.

Most people live along the coast, with a third of the population living in the large metropolitan areas of Lisbon and Porto.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Portuguese cities still retain their historic character and many of the old buildings remain intact. Lisbon hasn't changed much since the late 18th century. The natural environment is well preserved and there is no serious pollution.

The art of tile painting and glazing, known as azulejos, is one of the most popular art forms in Portugal. The technique was first introduced by the Moors and was adopted by the king in the 1500s and the use of the blue and white tiles spread across the country and is practiced by artisans today.

Eight out of ten Portuguese people are Roman Catholic. Saints' days and religious festivals are very popular events. Although the country has been modernized thanks to the money it receives from richer European countries, the people are still quite poor compared to those in other countries.

NATURE

Most of Portugal was once covered by forests. Today, only a quarter of the country remains forested. While some native species, such as the cork tree are still common, many plants are foreign species and were introduced by humans.

Farming and hunting have reduced the numbers of wild animals living in Portugal. The common animals are boars, wild goats, fallow deer, foxes, and Iberian hares. The Iberian lynx is the most endangered cat species in the world. Portugal and Spain are working together to create open space to allow the remaining few hundred lynxes to roam freely.

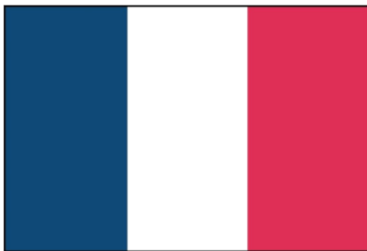
The coastline is a rich habitat for crabs, clams, and oysters, and tuna, bonito, and sardines are a common catch for Portuguese fishermen.

Many migratory birds stop in Portugal while on their journey to and from central Europe to Africa and beyond.

France

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** French Republic
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Paris
- **POPULATION:** 67,364,357
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** French
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 210,026 square miles (543,965 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Alps, Pyrenees, Massif Central
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Seine, Rhine, and Rhône



LEFT: FRENCH FLAG
RIGHT: EUROS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMSTIME



HISTORY

The country of France emerged from the fragmentation of the larger Carolingian empire, when Hugh Capet became King of West Francia in 987. This kingdom consolidated power and expanded territorially, becoming known as “France.” Early wars were fought over land with English monarchs, including the Hundred Years War, then against the Habsburgs, especially after the latter inherited Spain and appeared to surround France. At one point France was closely associated with the Avignon Papacy, and experienced wars of religion after the Reformation between a twisting combination of Catholic and Protestant. French royal power reached its peak with the reign of Louis XIV (1642–1715), known as the Sun King, and French culture dominated Europe.

Royal power collapsed fairly quickly after the financial excesses of Louis XIV and within a century France experienced the French Revolution, which began in 1789, overthrew the still-lavish spending Louis XVI (1754–1793) and established a republic. France now found itself fighting wars and exporting its world-changing events across Europe.

The French Revolution was soon eclipsed by the imperial ambitions of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821), and the ensuing Napoleonic Wars saw France first militarily dominate Europe, then be defeated. The monarchy was restored, but instability followed and a second republic, second empire and third republic followed in the nineteenth century. The early twentieth century was marked by two German invasions, in 1914 and 1940, and a return to a democratic republic after liberation. France is currently in its Fifth Republic, established in 1959 during upheavals in society.

GEOGRAPHY



France, the largest country in Western Europe, has long been a gateway between the continent's northern and southern regions. Its lengthy borders touch Germany and Belgium in the north; the Atlantic Ocean in the west; the Pyrenees Mountains and Spain in the south.

Wide fertile plains dominate most of the north and west, making France the agricultural epicenter of Europe. The sprawling, forested plateau of the Massif Central, a range of ancient mountains and extinct volcanoes, occupies France's southern interior.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

France is one of the oldest nations on Earth and the most ethnically diverse country in Europe. These deep and broad influences have made France a world leader throughout history in nearly all aspects of culture, including cuisine, wine-making, politics, philosophy, music, art, film, fashion, literature, and sports.

NATURE

France has ample land area to provide habitat for a wide variety of plants and animals. More than 25 percent of its territory is covered with forest, and another 50 percent is countryside or farmland.

Lowland forests are home to deer and wild boar, while the woodlands of the Alps and Pyrenees provide refuge for rare chamois antelope, ibex, brown bears, and alpine hares, among many other species. The Mediterranean coastline is a stopover of millions of migrating African birds, including flamingos, vultures, egrets, and bee-eaters.

The French government has made a broad commitment to preserving open spaces and the wildlife they contain. About 10 percent of the country has been set aside as national or regional parklands and nature reserves.

India

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of India, Bharat
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Federal republic
- **CAPITAL:** New Delhi
- **POPULATION:** 1,296,834,042
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Hindi, English, 21 others
- **MONEY:** Rupee
- **AREA:** 1,269,345 square miles (3,287,590 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGE:** Himalaya
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Ganges, Yamuna, Indus, Brahmaputra



LEFT: INDIAN FLAG, RIGHT: RUPEE Photograph by Oleg Mitukhin, Dreamstime

HISTORY

India's earliest known civilization arose about 5,000 years ago on the Indus River in what is now Pakistan. Archaeologists uncovered the remains of two huge cities with brick houses, piped water, and sewer systems. Nobody knows why, but these cities, called Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, were abandoned in 1700 B.C.

The Aryan people were farmers from Central Asia who arrived in India around 1500 B.C. They spoke Sanskrit, one of the world's oldest known languages. The Vedic Scriptures, writings that form the basis of the Hindu religion, were written during the Aryan reign.

In the 200-year reign of the Gupta Empire, starting in the fourth century A.D., arts, crafts, and sciences flourished. During this time, the Indian astronomer Aryabhata determined that the Earth revolved around the sun. This was long before the Western world accepted the theory.

Beginning in the 16th century, following a series of invasions by Muslim forces, a Mongol leader named Babur founded the Mongol Empire. The Mongols oversaw a golden age of art, literature, and architecture in India between 1527 and 1707. They built roads, mosques, gardens, and enormous tombs, including the grand Taj Mahal.

In the late 1400s, Europeans arrived in India and began setting up trading companies. In 1757, Britain gained control over most of the country. Uprisings against British rule began in 1856. In 1920, the famous Mahatma Gandhi began nonviolent protests to push the British out. In 1947, India had independence.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Society throughout India is divided into social ranks, called castes. Caste is determined by birth and there is almost no way to change it. High castes include priests, landowners, and soldiers. So-called Untouchables have no caste and do the most menial jobs.

India is a very spiritual country. It has no official religion, but more than 80 percent of Indians are Hindu. About 13 percent are Muslim. Other religions include Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, which all began in India.

GEOGRAPHY



India is part of the continent of Asia. Most of India forms a peninsula, which means it is surrounded by water on three sides. The world's highest mountain range, the Himalaya, rises in the north. The southeast is bordered by the Bay of Bengal, and the southwest is bordered by the Arabian Sea.

India's terrain varies widely, from the Thar Desert in the west to jungles in the northeast. A fertile area called the Ganges Plain covers much of northern India. This formation was created from soil that was deposited by rivers running from the Himalaya. In some places, this layer of silt is over 25,000 feet (7,620 meters) deep.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

For thousands of years, since the Hindu religion first evolved, respect for animal life has been an important part of Indians' beliefs. Cows in particular are sacred and cannot be harmed. They are even allowed to wander through city streets, which often causes traffic jams!

India's varied climate zones support about 65,000 animal species, including elephants, pythons, river dolphins, and rhinos, and 12,000 types of flowering plants. It is the only country in the world with both lions and tigers. It's also a bird watcher's paradise.

On the coast of the Bay of Bengal is the Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest. Here, tigers swim in the same rivers as dolphins, sea turtles, sharks, and saltwater crocodiles. This unique landscape is constantly under threat as sea levels rise and humans hunt illegally and clear trees for firewood.

The Himalaya mountains provide a home for some of India's rarest animals and plants. The most elusive animal is the snow leopard. Bears and black buck live lower down, and in the northeast, the tiger and one-horned rhinoceros can be found.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

India's parliamentary government was inherited from the British. After independence in 1947, one party, the Congress Party, and one family, the Nehru family, dominated politics in India for decades. Now, however, many parties compete for elected positions.

India's economy is growing so fast that experts predict it will soon become one of the world's leading markets. Indians are hard workers. And though many are poorly educated, there are many others who are highly trained college graduates.

Mexico

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** United Mexican States
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic of federated states
- **CAPITAL:** Mexico City
- **POPULATION:** 125,959,205
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Spanish
- **MONEY:** Peso
- **AREA:** 758,449 square miles (1,964,375 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Sierra Madre
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Rio Grande, Yaqui



LEFT: MEXICAN FLAG

RIGHT: MEXICAN PESO

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLYN THOMAS, ALAMY

HISTORY



This illustration of an eagle eating a snake on top of a cactus shows the legend of how an Aztec god marked the spot where these people would live. The symbol is still used on Mexico's flag today.

PHOTOGRAPH BY DEA / G. DAGLI ORTI/DE AGOSTINI VIA GETTY IMAGES

The Olmec people, Mexico's first complex society, emerged in the southeastern part of the country around 1200 B.C. They were later followed by the Maya, the Toltec, and the Aztec peoples.

Mexico's ancient societies built great cities and huge pyramids, created remarkable works of art, and even studied the stars and planets to determine when to plant crops and hold ceremonies.

In the early 1500s, the Spanish arrived in Mexico. The Aztec people got sick from smallpox and other diseases that the Spanish brought with them. The Spaniards also seized and destroyed the Aztec capital, called Tenochtitlán. The Spanish ruled Mexico until 1821.

GEOGRAPHY



Mexico is a land of extremes, with high mountains and deep canyons in the center of the country, sweeping deserts in the north, and dense rain forests in the south and east.

Mountains cover much of Mexico. Between the Sierra Madre Oriental mountain range in the east and the Sierra Madre Occidental in the west lie small mountain ranges on the Central Plateau. These regions are rich with valuable metals like silver and copper.

The stretch of land called the Yucatán Peninsula juts into the Gulf of Mexico from Mexico's southeastern tip. It was once the home of the Maya civilization, an ancient culture whose amazing buildings can still be seen today.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

Few nations on Earth support as many plant and animal species as Mexico does. Located partway between the Equator and the Arctic Circle, it is a refuge for animals fleeing extreme cold in the north and intense heat in the south.

In northern Mexico, deserts are full of plant and animal species that have found ways to survive the harsh environment. On Mexico's west coast, gray whales swim thousands of miles each year from Alaska to breed in the waters off Baja California.

The rain forests and coastal wetlands of eastern Mexico are home to thousands of tropical plant species and elusive animals like jaguars and quetzal birds.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Mexico is rich in natural resources, like oil, silver, copper, and agricultural products. Its economy boasts a rich diversity of agricultural crops, highly productive oil fields, a growing manufacturing base, as well as strong trade with the United States and Canada.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Mexico is the product of a rich Native American heritage, three centuries of Spanish rule, and a shared border with the world's richest country, the United States. Today, many Mexicans are mestizos, which means they have a mix of Native American and Spanish blood.

Throughout its history, Mexico has been home to great artists. The Maya and other Native Americans made impressive murals, sculptures, and jewelry. Modern Mexican artists include great painters, photographers, sculptors, and muralists.

Mexicans take sports seriously. In ancient times, losers of a ritual ball game were once put to death. In some dangerous sports, like bullfighting and rodeo (which was invented in Mexico), competitors still put their lives on the line.

Brazil

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Federal Republic of Brazil
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Democratic federal republic
- **CAPITAL:** Brasília
- **POPULATION:** 208,846,892
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Portuguese
- **MONEY:** Real
- **AREA:** 3,286,470 square miles (8,511,965 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Serra do Mar, Serra do Espinhaço
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Amazon, São Francisco, Paraná, Tocantins



LEFT: BRAZIL FLAG, RIGHT: REAL
PHOTOGRAPHS BY GLAUCO MENEGHELLI, ISTOCKPHOTO

HISTORY

Until recently, scientists thought Brazil was first settled by Asians about 10,000 years ago. But new evidence shows there were people living there at least 32,000 years ago. Some experts think they may have arrived from islands in the Pacific Ocean.

Brazil was added to the map of the world during the great European explorations in the late 15th century led by Portugal and Spain. When Europeans first reached the coast of Brazil, the country was home to about 30 million indigenous people, or Amerindians. Today, only about 300,000 remain, living primarily in Brazil's remotest places.

Portugal established its first colony in Brazil in 1530. Colonists created sugarcane plantations along the coast and sent diamonds and gold back to Europe. Soon, people from West Africa were brought to Brazil to work as slaves. The discovery of large inland gold reserves brought thousands of people from the coasts and as far away as Europe to the interior of the country.

In 1789, Brazilians tried to kick out their Portuguese rulers. The rebellion was soon put down, but it started a movement toward independence. By 1822, Brazil was a sovereign nation. Kings of Portuguese blood ruled until 1888, when military leaders and landowners expelled the king, and Brazil became a federal republic.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Brazil is a federal republic with a president, a National Congress, and a judiciary. From 1888 until recently, the country struggled with democracy. But in 1985, the military government was peacefully removed, and by 1995, Brazil's politics and economy had become fairly stable.

Brazil has many different soils and climates, so it can produce a great variety of crops. Its agricultural exports include sugarcane, latex, coffee, cocoa beans, cotton, soybeans, rice, and tropical fruits.

Brazil is also South America's most industrial nation, producing chemicals, steel, aircraft, and cars.

GEOGRAPHY



Brazil is the largest country in South America and the fifth largest nation in the world. It forms an enormous triangle on the eastern side of the continent with a 4,500-mile (7,400-kilometer) coastline along the Atlantic Ocean. It has borders with every South American country except Chile and Ecuador.

The Brazilian landscape is very varied. It is most well known for its dense forests, including the Amazon, the world's largest jungle, in the north. But there are also dry grasslands (called pampas), rugged hills, pine forests, sprawling wetlands, immense plateaus, and a long coastal plain.

Northern Brazil is dominated by the Amazon River and the jungles that surround it. The Amazon is not one river but a network of many hundreds of waterways. Its total length stretches 4,250 miles (6,840 kilometers). Thousands of species live in the river, including the infamous piranha and the boto, or pink river dolphin.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Most Brazilians are descended from three ethnic groups: Amerindians, European settlers (mainly from Portugal), and Africans. Starting in the 19th century, waves of immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, and even Japan added to this mix. This diversity of cultures has created a rich religious, musical, and culinary culture.

Brazilians are soccer crazy, and their country has produced some of the best players. The most famous of all is Edson Arantes do Nascimento, better known as Pelé. Brazil has won the World Cup soccer finals five times, more than any other nation.

NATURE

Brazil has the greatest variety of animals of any country in the world. It is home to 600 mammal species, 1,500 fish species, 1,600 bird species, and an amazing 100,000 different types of insects. Brazil's jungles are home to most of its animal life, but many unique species also live in the pampas and semidesert regions.

In the central-western part of Brazil sits a flat, swampy area called the Pantanal. This patchwork of flooded lagoons and small islands is the world's largest wetland. Here live giant anacondas, huge guinea pig relatives called capibaras, and fierce South American alligators called caimans.

For thousands of years, people have been exploiting the jungles of Brazil. But since Europeans arrived about five centuries ago, forest destruction has been rampant. Most of Brazil's Atlantic rain forest is now gone, and huge tracts of the Amazon are disappearing every year. The government has established many national parks and refuges, but they only cover about 7 percent of the country.

Canada

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Canada
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Federal parliamentary state
- **CAPITAL:** Ottawa
- **POPULATION:** 35,881,659
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** English, French
- **MONEY:** Canadian dollar
- **AREA:** 3,849,674 square miles (9,970,610 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Rockies, Coast, Laurentian
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** St. Lawrence, Mackenzie



LEFT: CANADIAN FLAG, RIGHT: CANADIAN DOLLAR Photograph by Peter Spirer, Dreamstime

HISTORY

The first people to come to Canada arrived between 15,000 and 30,000 years ago across a land bridge that joined Asia and North America. Around A.D. 1000, the Viking explorer Leif Eriksson reached Newfoundland, Canada. He tried to establish a settlement, but it didn't last.

In the 16th century, French and British settlers arrived. Land disputes between farmers and fur traders led to four wars between 1689 and 1763. The final war, called the French and Indian War, left the British in control of Canada, but French influence remains strong even today.

In 1867, Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick combined to form a dominion with its own government, parliament, and prime minister. Manitoba joined soon after. In 1931, Canada became an independent nation.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The British monarch is the head of state of Canada. The monarch is represented by a governor-general, who has very limited powers. Laws are made by Canada's elected federal government, which includes a parliament and a prime minister.

Britain's Quebec Act of 1774 granted Quebec its own legal and religious rights. Despite this concession, many Quebec citizens have long sought independence. In votes held in 1980 and 1995, Quebec decided to stay in Canada. But the second vote was very close, and the debate is still alive.

Canada has provided fish, furs, and other natural resources to the world since the 1500s. Today, it is a world leader in agricultural production, telecommunications, and energy technologies. The vast majority of Canada's exports go to the United States.

GEOGRAPHY



Canada is a vast and rugged land. From north to south it spans more than half the Northern Hemisphere. From east to west it stretches almost 4,700 miles (7,560 kilometers) across six time zones. It is the second largest country in the world, but it has only one-half of one percent of the world's population.

Canada features black-blue lakes, numerous rivers, majestic western mountains, rolling central plains, and forested eastern valleys. The Canadian Shield, a hilly region of lakes and swamps, stretches across northern Canada and has some of the oldest rocks on Earth.

Canada's far north lies in the frozen grip of the Arctic, where ice, snow, and glaciers dominate the landscape. Few trees grow here, and farming is not practical. Native Canadians, called First Nations people, live in this region by hunting and fishing.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

Canada's remote north and extensive forests are home to wildlife, from bears, wolves, beavers, deer, mountain lions, and bighorn sheep to smaller animals like raccoons, otters, and rabbits. The country's lakes and rivers, which contain about 20 percent of all fresh water on Earth, are full of fish such as trout and salmon.

Canada's prairies in the south are home to bison and pronghorn antelope. Farther north are Canada's sprawling evergreen forests, which have lots of wildlife, including moose and black bears. Even farther north is the cold, bare tundra, where herds of caribou and musk ox live.

Canadians work hard to protect the native wildlife. Canada has 41 national parks and three marine conservation areas. Nevertheless, species like wolves, lynx, and Atlantic fish have been overhunted and overfished.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

In some ways Canada is many nations in one. Descendants of British and French immigrants make up about half the population. They were followed by other European and Asian immigrants. First Nations peoples make up about four percent of the population.

Inuit people live mostly in the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. Many Native Canadians live on their traditional lands, but many others have moved to cities across Canada. First Nations artwork is widely recognized and is seen as a symbol of Canadian culture.

Jamaica

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Jamaica
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary democracy
- **CAPITAL:** Kingston
- **POPULATION:** 2,812,090
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** English
- **MONEY:** Jamaican dollar
- **AREA:** 4,411 square miles (10,992 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Blue Mountains, John Crow Mountains, Don Figuero Mountains, Cockpit Country
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Black River, Rio Cobre, Rio Grande



LEFT: JAMAICAN FLAG, RIGHT: JAMAICAN DOLLAR Photograph by Maypen, Dreamstime

HISTORY

The Taino people arrived from South America in the seventh century and called the island Xaymaca, "land of wood and water," because of the green dense forest and the hundreds of fast-flowing streams that once covered the landscape.

Christopher Columbus was the first European to visit Jamaica in 1494 and called it "the fairest island that eyes have beheld." The Taino people were enslaved and by 1600 were wiped out by disease or harsh treatment. The Spanish brought in slaves from Africa and ruled the island until 1655 when the British seized it.

African slaves worked on the sugar plantations and were treated very cruelly by the owners. By the late 1700s, Jamaica became one of the largest slave markets for the Western Hemisphere. There were many slave uprisings and slavery was finally abolished in Jamaica in 1838. The island became independent in 1962.

NATURE

The island is home to the endangered Homerus swallowtail, the largest butterfly in the Western Hemisphere. Its wingspan is 6 inches (25 cm), which makes this insect larger than many of the island's birds.

Bird watchers enjoy the 250 bird species that can be seen on the island, including 26 birds that are found nowhere else. The vervain, the world's second smallest bird is found here. This tiny hummingbird is only 2.5 inches (8 cm) long. Jamaica's national bird is the streamtail hummingbird, or "doctor bird." It has long tail feathers and a scarlet bill.

Jamaica boasts more than 200 orchids and 550 different ferns. One quarter of the 3,000 plant species are endemic, or native species. Years of development have decreased the habitats for wildlife on the island. The American crocodile, manatee, and iguana are rare now because they were hunted for meat and hides.

GEOGRAPHY



Jamaica is a mountainous island in the Caribbean Sea about 600 miles (965 kilometers) south of Miami, Florida. It is part of the chain of Caribbean islands called the Greater Antilles, along with Cuba, Hispaniola, and Puerto Rico. Jamaica was formed when the North American and Caribbean tectonic plates collided about 25 million years ago.

Jamaica is the tip of a mountain rising from the sea floor. Nearly half of the island is more than 1,000 feet (330 meters) above sea level. There are lush rolling hills that are ideal for agriculture and coastal beach regions that are popular with tourists.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Most of the population lives in the city and one third of all Jamaicans live in the capital of Kingston. More than 90 percent of the population is of African descent, but many other people have come from China, India, Germany, and Syria to find work on the island. Jamaica's motto is "Out of Many, One People."

When most people think of Jamaica they think of Reggae, or "Ragged Music." The music was born in the 1950s and '60s from the musical styles of mento, ska, and rocksteady. The most famous reggae star was Bob Marley, who was backed by his group the Wailers. Other famous reggae stars include Desmond Dekkar, Jimmy Cliff, Peter Tosh, and Burning Spear.

Jamaicans are spiritual people and follow many religions, including Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, and Islam. Many are Rastafarians, followers of a Christian-based faith, which grew out of a civil rights movement in the 1930s.

Rastafarians believe that Haile Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia from 1916 to 1974, was their savior. Rasta men wear their hair in dreadlocks, believing that hair should not be cut, and wear clothing in red, gold, and green—the colors of the Ethiopian flag.

Chile

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Chile
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Santiago
- **POPULATION:** 17,925,262
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Spanish
- **MONEY:** Chilean peso
- **AREA:** 291,932 square miles (756,102 square kilometers)



LEFT: CHILEAN FLAG

RIGHT: CHILEAN PESO



GEOGRAPHY



Chile is a long narrow country which extends like a ribbon down the west coast of South America. While the coastline is over 4,000 miles (6,437 kilometers) long, it is only about 61 miles (91 kilometers) wide. The country has suffered from many earthquakes, such as the massive 8.8-magnitude quake that struck the country in February 2010.

Cape Horn is the southernmost tip of South America. In the past, ships had to round the horn to sail from Pacific to Atlantic ports and to Europe before the Panama Canal was built. Cape Horn is known for high winds and treacherous waves.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

HISTORY

The northern part of the country was ruled by the Inca before the Spanish took control in the 16th century. Native Mapuche people lived in the southern and central regions before the country became a Spanish colony.

The country gained independence from Spain in 1810. Toward the end of the 1800s, many Europeans began to settle in Chile, including Germans, French, British, and Italians. Many Chinese moved to Chile to help build the railroad.

Chile was once considered to be a very stable and free country. But in 1973 a bloody battle overthrew Salvador Allende's elected Marxist government and the country suffered 16 years under the dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet. Democracy was restored in 1989.

NATURE

The region is rich in natural beauty and plant and animal life. The long coastline is home to penguins, pelicans, and sea lions, and migratory whales can be seen in the waters as they journey to and from feeding and breeding grounds. Puma, alpacas, vicunas, foxes, condors, and flamingos are all found on the diverse landscapes of Chile.

The Atacama Desert is one of the driest areas on the Earth. There are many species of reptiles and cacti. The country's rich supply of copper is also found in the desert region.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Today only about 5 percent of the population is native Mapuche and other indigenous groups. Nearly 95 percent of Chileans have a mixture of native and European roots. There are areas in the south where the Mapuche live, speak their language, and practice their own religion.

About 40 percent of the population lives in the area around the capital of Santiago. Children in rural areas need to wake up at 5:00 - 6:00 a.m. to walk to school or meet the bus. Their journeys sometimes take two hours each way. After school, they help their parents in the fields and do their homework.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The country is governed by an elected president, who is both the chief of state and head of government. Presidential elections are held every four years. The president picks cabinet members. There are two houses of congress, the National Congress and the Senate.

The country is one of the largest exporters of grapes.

Ukraine

FAST FACTS

OFFICIAL NAME: Ukraine

FORM OF GOVERNMENT: Semi-presidential republic

CAPITAL: Kyiv

POPULATION: 43,745,640

OFFICIAL LANGUAGE: Ukrainian

MONEY: Hryvnia

AREA: 603,550 square miles (1,563,187 square kilometers)

MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES: Carpathian, Crimean

MAJOR RIVERS: Dnieper, Dniester



LEFT: UKRAINE FLAG
PHOTOGRAPH BY TATOHRA / SHUTTERSTOCK



RIGHT: HRYVNIYA
PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX GONCHAROV / SHUTTERSTOCK

HISTORY

EARLY HISTORY

Humans have settled in Ukraine since prehistoric times—archaeologists believe that humans were using stone tools there some 30,000 years ago. Around the 8th century B.C., long-term settlers began to arrive; these included Cimmerians, Scythians, and Sarmatians, tribes of people from what's now the country of Iran.

Around the 6th century B.C., ancient Greeks and Romans began to colonize the coast of the Black Sea, trading wine, iron, silver, and gold. Around the same time, tribes of people called Slavs were settling throughout the country. By the 11th century, Slavs had joined Viking invaders called Varangians to form the powerful kingdom of Kyivan Rus, the largest empire in Europe at the time.

In the 13th century, Mongols from central Asia attacked the kingdom and ended the Kyivan Rus reign. In the 1300s, Lithuania took control of most of Ukraine.

RUSSIA TAKES OVER

Polish invaders arrived in Ukraine in the late 1500s. The Poles forced most Ukrainians to be serfs, or to work as farmers on land they didn't own. Some serfs rebelled and formed a military force called the Cossacks. In 1648, the Cossacks asked for Russia's help to defeat the Poles, and the Cossacks won independence. But by the late 1700s, Russia had gained control of almost all of Ukraine.

In the late 19th century and the early 20th century, many Ukrainians tried to keep their culture and traditions alive. But Russia pushed back and banned the Ukrainian language in print and in public. By 1922, Ukraine was part of the newly formed Soviet Union. (The Soviet Union was the largest country to have ever existed and included what are now the separate countries of Russia, Lithuania, and Belarus, among others.)

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In the 1930s, Soviets took over Ukrainian farms, leading to the death of millions of Ukrainians from starvation. During World War II in the 1940s, Ukraine was invaded by Germany. German forces enslaved millions of Ukrainians and murdered some hundreds of thousands of Ukrainian Jews. In 1944, Germans were driven out of Ukraine by the Soviets.

UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE

After the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991, Ukraine declared its independence and elected the country's first president, Leonid Kravchuk. The country did well at first. It established new currency—the hryvnia (like the U.S. dollar)—and adopted the 1996 constitution under its second president, Leonid Kuchma. But in the early 2000s, Kuchma was accused of rigging elections, meaning that he and others in his party might have cheated to win.

POLITICAL UNREST

In 2004, Viktor Yanukovych was elected president. But he also was suspected of cheating, and many Ukrainians who supported the losing candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, protested the results. When Yushchenko mysteriously became ill, supporters thought pro-Yanukovych forces had poisoned him so they started a protest called the Orange Revolution. Yushchenko was finally put in power.

In 2010, Yanukovych ran for president again and this time was elected. He began to establish closer ties with Russia, something not all Ukrainians liked. Some people in the Russian-speaking eastern part of the country agreed with this move, but much of the rest of the country didn't want to get involved with the Russian government. Violent protests broke out all over the country, with many calling for Yanukovych to step down.

Yanukovych was removed from office in 2014, and Petro Poroshenko was elected to replace him. Around the same time, Russian troops invaded the Crimean Peninsula, an area of land in southern Ukraine bordered by the Black Sea. Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, said that the people of Crimea had voted for independence from Ukraine.

Many Ukrainians and leaders from several other countries didn't like Putin's actions and thought the "vote" wasn't real. But in March 2014, Putin signed a treaty with some Crimean leaders that said that Crimea was part of Russia. Ukrainian officials announced that they would not recognize the agreement and still considered Crimea part of Ukraine, not Russia.

Russian forces remained in Crimea to keep Ukraine from taking it back. Later in 2014, fights along the eastern border broke out between Ukrainians and Russian-backed rebels who wanted all of Ukraine to become part of Russia.

In 2019, comedian and actor Volodymyr Zelensky was elected president of Ukraine. Zelensky ran on a platform of uniting the country and ending border battles in the east with Russia. To help with that, the United States planned to give Ukraine millions of dollars in military aid to help fight the Russian occupations.

Ukraine con't

In July 2019, U.S. president [Donald Trump](#) was accused of withholding those funds unless Zelensky investigated Trump's political rival, [Joe Biden](#). He refused, and Trump was eventually impeached, or formally accused of misconduct in office, by the U.S. House of Representatives over these claims. (Ukraine received the aid later in the year.)

WAR WITH RUSSIA

In February 2022, Putin announced an invasion on the country and sent troops to take over major cities, including the capital, Kyiv. Ukrainian citizens have been fighting back against the attacks, and Zelensky has vowed to remain in the country and fight until Ukraine regains its freedom.

Many world leaders strongly condemned Putin's actions, and some punished Russia by stopping trade with the country or putting travel bans in place. The hope is that these punishments—called sanctions—will hurt Putin and Russia enough to stop the fighting before the war spreads into other European nations.

GOVERNMENT AND ECONOMY



The sunflower is Ukraine's national flower—the country is the world's largest producer of sunflower seeds.

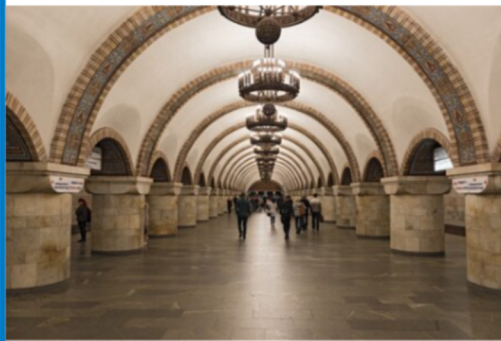
PHOTOGRAPH BY PETRO POKYDKO / 500PX / GETTY IMAGES

Ukraine is a semi-presidential republic. The public elects a president for a five-year term, who in turn nominates a prime minister. The nominee is then approved by the country's 450-member parliament, called the Verkhovna Rada.

Ukraine's current constitution, which was adopted in 1996, established executive, legislative, and judicial branches. The prime minister oversees the creation and execution of laws through the legislative and judicial branches. The president represents Ukraine at ceremonies around the world and conducts negotiations and international treaties.

Agriculture products are some of the country's main exports, or goods sold to other countries. Ukraine is one of the largest grain exporters in the world and the world's largest producer of sunflower seeds. (The sunflower is the country's national flower.)

PEOPLE AND CULTURE



Kyiv, Ukraine's capital, is home to the deepest metro station in the world, Arsenalna Metro Station. Riding the escalator to the bottom can take five minutes!

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAINER LESNIEWSKI / SHUTTERSTOCK

Despite being one of Europe's largest countries in size, Ukraine's population of about 43 million people makes it less populated than smaller European countries such as [Germany](#) and [France](#). Most people are native Ukrainians, with Russians making up the next largest group. Belarusians and Moldovans live in the country, too.

Most Ukrainians are Christians, following a branch known as Eastern Orthodoxy. A small number of Ukrainians are Jewish or Muslim (people who practice Islam).

Most Ukrainians live in cities or towns. Kyiv, Ukraine's capital and most populous city, is home to the deepest metro station in the world, Arsenalna Metro Station. Builders had to dig more than 340 feet to go under the Dnieper River—riding the escalator to the bottom can take five minutes!

Popular dishes in Ukraine include *borscht*, a hot beetroot soup traditionally served with garlic doughnuts; *varenyky*, dumplings stuffed with fillings like potatoes, sauerkraut, or strawberries; *holubtsi*, cabbage rolls stuffed with boiled rice or meat; and *deruni*, potato pancakes. A popular seasonal dish is *paska*, salted bread served during the Easter holiday.



GEOGRAPHY



Most of Ukraine is flat, but the Carpathian Mountains stretch across part of the country's western border.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CREATIVE TRAVEL PROJECTS / SHUTTERSTOCK

Ukraine, the second-largest country in [Europe](#), is twice the size of [Italy](#) and slightly smaller than the state of [Texas](#). Bordered on the south by the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov, Ukraine shares borders with the eastern European countries of [Belarus](#), [Hungary](#), [Moldova](#), [Poland](#), [Romania](#), [Russia](#), and [Slovakia](#).

Most of Ukraine is flat, with mountains found only in the west (the Carpathians) or in the south of the Crimean Peninsula (the Crimeans). The country's fertile plains, called steppes, are ideal for growing crops like wheat. Ukraine is sometimes called the "breadbasket of Europe."

The Dnieper, Ukraine's longest river and Europe's fourth-longest river, flows down from Belarus straight through the middle of Ukraine and into the Black Sea in the south.

NATURE



Beech martens, members of the weasel family, live throughout Ukraine.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JUNIORS BILDARCHIV GMBH / ALAMY

Ukraine is home to fertile grasslands, high mountains, and dense forests. Native predators include wolves, martens, and foxes; they might prey on rodents like hamsters and jerboa. Black and hazel grouse, partridges, and wild geese soar the skies, and pike, carp, and sturgeons swim in Ukraine's lakes and rivers.

In 1986, a nuclear accident had a devastating impact on northern Ukraine's environment. A reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded, killing many people and animals in Ukraine. Contaminated farmlands near Chernobyl are expected to be unsafe for thousands of years.

But scientists also saw a surprising positive impact. Much of the area surrounding the plant was closed to the public because of dangerous radioactive contamination. And because of the lack of people, more wildlife has been returning to the area. Cameras in the area, called the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, have even spotted rare animals such as lynx and European bison.

Argentina

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Argentine Republic
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Republic
- **CAPITAL:** Buenos Aires
- **POPULATION:** 44,694,198
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Spanish
- **MONEY:** Argentine peso
- **AREA:** 1,073,364 square miles (2,780,400 square kilometers)



LEFT: ARGENTINE FLAG, RIGHT: ARGENTINE PESO Photograph by Asafta, Dreamstime

HISTORY

The Spanish arrived in 1516 and ruled the country for 300 years. In 1806, a British force overpowered Spanish military in Buenos Aires and attacked the Malvinas Islands, also called the Falkland Islands. Local residents recaptured the capital, but never regained control of the islands. These events led to the loosening of Spain's grip on Argentina.

In 1810, Napoleon's forces conquered all major Spanish cities in Spain and the Argentine people were empowered to take control of their country. They gained independence in 1816.

In 1946, Juan Perón became president due to his popularity with the working class. His wife, Eva, known as Evita, formed a foundation and gave out cash and benefits to the poor. When she died of cancer in 1952, the people were very sad. She was a symbol of hope to all the poor in Argentina. Juan Perón was forced out of office after he tried to increase his powers. Even after he left office, his followers continued to fight for political power.

After many violent years and near civil war, Perón was re-elected president and his new wife, Isabel, became vice president. He died suddenly and Isabel became president and soon the country's economy fell apart.

The military took control of the country in 1976, and a period of violence called the "dirty war" ensued, during which as many as 20,000-30,000 revolutionaries or sympathizers were killed.

In 1982, the president of Argentina, General Leopoldo Galtieri invaded the Falkland Islands off the coast in the Atlantic Ocean thinking the British wouldn't put up a fight. Galtieri miscalculated and British forces won an easy victory. After the defeat, the country moved toward democracy and civilian rule.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The country is a federal republic. There have been several democratically elected presidents after many years of political turmoil.

The National Congress is made of the Senate with 72 seats and the Chamber of Deputies with a total of 257 seats. There are seven judges in the Supreme Court, but that number will be reduced to five over the next few years. The president picks the judges and the senate must approve their appointments.

Sheep herding, oil, mining, agriculture, and tourism make up Patagonia's economy.

GEOGRAPHY



Argentina is a vast country located in the southern part of South America. The eighth largest country in the world, it is the second largest country in South America after Brazil, and it's about one-third the size of the United States. Argentina is bordered by the Andes Mountains and Chile to the west.

To the east of the Andes, the interior of the country is flat, fertile grassland called the Pampas. The eastern border of the country is the Atlantic Ocean. Bolivia is to the northwest and Paraguay is to the north. The high mountain spine of the Andes, called the Andes Cordillera, creates a natural 3,195-mile (5,141.9-kilometer) border with Chile.

The country is divided into four regions: The Andes, the North, the Pampas, and Patagonia. The Pampas is the agricultural heartland.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Unlike Mexico and South American countries such as Peru and Ecuador, Argentina has fewer native people and a large population, which came from Europe. The population is comprised as much as 95% of people of European descent, mostly from Italy, Spain, and Germany. Much of the native population died from diseases brought in by Europeans.

Nearly half of the population lives in the area around Buenos Aires. Buenos Aires has been called the "Paris of South America," because of the European influences.

The people are well-educated and 97% of the population can read and write.

Soccer is the favorite sport in Argentina.

Gauchos, like American cowboys, have been a symbol of the open plains of the Pampas region.

NATURE

Argentina is rich in animal species. The coast of Patagonia is home to elephant seals, fur seals, penguins, and sea lions. The waters off the Atlantic are home to sharks, orcas, dolphins, and salmon.

In the north, there are many large cat species such as the cougar, jaguar, and the ocelot. There are also crocodiles and caiman. Flamingos, toucans, turtles, and tortoises also live in the subtropical north.

Patagonia is a sparsely populated area rich in natural resources and wildlife, including herons, condors, pumas, tortoises, and guanacos.

The highest mountain in the Andes range is the Cerro Aconcagua, which peaks at 22,384 feet (6,960 meters). Northeast Argentina features rain forests and Iguazú Falls. These spectacular falls, on Argentina's border with Brazil, descend along a 1.6-mile (2.7-kilometer) front in a horseshoe shape.

As the country develops it is being affected by deforestation and pollution.

Ireland

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Ireland
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional Democracy
- **CAPITAL:** Dublin
- **POPULATION:** 5,068,050
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** English and Gaelic
- **AREA:** 26,592 square miles (68,890 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Macgillycuddy's Reeks, Wicklow Mountains
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Shannon, Liffey, Boyne, Moy, Barrow



LEFT: IRISH FLAG



RIGHT: EUROS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMSTIME

HISTORY

Archaeologists think the first people to settle in Ireland arrived around 6000 B.C. By 3500 B.C., settlers were using stone tools to clear farmlands. Around 700 B.C., a diverse and technologically advanced culture from central Europe called the Celts began to settle the island. They would thrive there for nearly 2,000 years.

In the ninth century A.D., Viking invaders began raids into Ireland. They established settlements that later became some of the country's main cities, including the capital, Dublin. The Vikings and Celts fought often for 200 years until a battle in 1014 united the country. Peace broke down quickly though, and Ireland was divided into many kingdoms.

In 1170, Norman Vikings who had taken control of England invaded Ireland and made it an English territory. In the early 1600s, England's official religion became Protestant while most Irish remained Roman Catholic. This would create tensions that would eventually lead to revolution and Ireland's independence.

By the 1820s, British laws unfair to Catholics had sparked a mass movement for Irish sovereignty. In 1829, many of those laws were overturned, but Ireland still wanted freedom. In 1922, after violent uprisings, the Irish Free State was created within the British Empire.

Ireland became a fully independent republic in 1937. By 1949, they had no ties to the United Kingdom.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Ireland is a nation of storytellers. The tradition dates back to Celtic bards, who would record and recite the country's history. Many famed writers come from Ireland, including several winners of the Nobel Prize for literature.

St. Patrick's Day—observed internationally every March 17—is packed with parades, good luck charms, and all things green. The event started as a religious holiday, but over time it's become a celebration of Irish culture.

GEOGRAPHY



Ireland is an island nation on the westernmost edge of Europe. It is the continent's second largest island (after Great Britain). The Republic of Ireland occupies 80 percent of this landmass, while a large chunk of land in the north is part of the United Kingdom.

Ireland is known for its wide expanses of lush, green fields. In fact, its nickname is the Emerald Isle. But there are also large areas of rugged, rocky landscape. About 15,000 years ago, Ireland was completely covered by thick glaciers. The movement of these giant sheets of ice stripped the soil, leaving huge tracts of flat, limestone pavement.

The midlands and west coast of Ireland are dotted with damp peat bogs, the soggy remains of dried-up ancient lakes left by the glaciers. Ireland's highlands rise mainly in the southwest, often ending at sheer cliffs that plunge thousands of feet into the Atlantic Ocean.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

The Irish have a great affection for nature and rural life. The country's first coins even featured pictures of animals. Low levels of development and pollution in Ireland have left most of the nation's open spaces relatively undisturbed.

Did you know that there are no wild snakes in Ireland? The sea has stopped many animals common on mainland Europe from reaching the island. There are also only two wild mouse species, one type of lizard, and just three kinds of amphibians.

Irish wildlife is protected by government conservation programs. To preserve natural habitat, the government has established six national parks and hundreds of national heritage areas throughout the country.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The government of Ireland consists of an elected parliament, which makes the laws, and a president, who is head of state. The head of the government is the Taoiseach (pronounced tee-shuck), which means "chief." The Taoiseach is the leader of the political party with the most parliament members.

For most of its history, Ireland's economy has been based on farming and agriculture. But since the late 1950s, government efforts to attract business have turned the country from one of Europe's poorest nations to its second wealthiest. The amazing turnaround earned Ireland the nickname "Celtic Tiger."

Scotland



Official name: Scotland, Alba

Form of government: constitutional monarchy

Capital city: Edinburgh

Largest city: Glasgow

Population: around 5.2 million

Monetary unit: Pound sterling (GBP)

Official languages: English/Gaelic/Scots

Area: 78,772 km² (30,414 sq mi)

Major mountain ranges: Southern Uplands, Central Lowlands, Grampian Mountains, North West Highlands

Major rivers: Tay, Spey, Dee, Tweed, Clyde

Scotland's geography and landscape

Scotland is a country in Europe and is part of the island of Great Britain (Europe's largest island) alongside England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This lush beautiful country is bursting with green spaces, lush forests, towering mountains and vast lochs (the Scottish word for lakes!).

The country can be roughly divided into three areas – lowlands, Highlands and islands. The lowlands are known for their fertile farmland and thick woodlands, the Highlands for their towering mountains, sweeping moorland and deep lochs, and the islands for their compact wild landscapes, beautiful beaches and far-reaching sea views.

Did you know?

Hundreds of millions of years ago Scotland's landmass was once completely separate from England and Wales – it was actually joined to America and Greenland!

Scottish government and economy

Following centuries of Scotland's policies lying in the hands of English politicians miles away in Westminster in London, a new Scottish Parliament was created and opened in 1999 at Holyrood in Edinburgh.

The Scottish Parliament is made up of 129 elected representatives who debate issues and make laws for Scotland. The head of the Scottish Government is the First Minister.

From 1850 – 1950 Scotland's economy mainly centred around heavy industry like shipbuilding, coal mining, steel and iron ore mining and locomotive building. During World War I and World War II this brought prosperity to Scotland, but shortly afterwards the economy went into steep decline.

In the 1970s crude oil began to be pumped from the North Sea, creating a new industry in Scotland. The country now boasts a strong and varied economy, with industries such as financial and business, renewable energy and sustainable tourism.

Scottish wildlife and nature

With so many habitats, there's plenty of fascinating wildlife to see in Scotland. You'll find river dwellers such as otters, salmon and trout and red squirrels and birds, such as capercaillies, find refuge in the thick forests. Out on the mountains and in the moorland you might spot majestic red deer or mountain hares while the islands are the perfect place to spot seals and seabirds, such as puffins.

Many animal species are protected in Scotland and there are two National Parks – the Cairngorms National Park and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park – as well as numerous beautiful nature reserves, that have been set up to protect the land and the wildlife that lives there.

Scottish history

Scotland has been populated for 12,000 years, and has a rich and complex history. In 43 AD the Romans successfully invaded Britain and fought frequently with the native Scots, called the Caledonians.

From the 1200s to the 1300s the Scottish clan system became firmly established in the Highlands. Ruled over by a clan chief, these clans were like tribes and were made up of family members and people who had a loyalty to the chief. Each clan held a particular territory and clan members could be distinguished by the clothes they wore – the origins of what we now know as Scottish clan tartan!

In 1707 the Act of Union was signed, meaning Scotland, England and Wales were now a single state with one monarch (known as the United Kingdom of Great Britain).

In 1745 Charles Edward Stuart, or 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' as he is often known, travelled to Scotland to reclaim the thrones that his grandfather, once king of England, Ireland and Scotland, had lost in 1688. He had support from lots of Scottish clans but despite their early victories, they were defeated at the Battle of Culloden in 1746.

Following the battle, the British government was determined to bring the Highlanders under their control and harsh laws were passed to eradicate all aspect of Highland culture, including the Gaelic language and traditional clothing. This signalled the end of the Highland clan system.

Despite these uncertain times, the 1700s also saw the beginning of one of the greatest periods in Scotland's history – the Scottish Enlightenment. From the mid 1700s to the early 1800s educated Scottish people, such as professors, doctors and writers, began to question what was previously believed and instead formulate new theories and ideas. The discoveries and advances that were made during this time went on to shape the modern world as we know it.

Scottish people and culture

The Scots are a nation of innovators. Throughout the centuries Scottish people have brought us a huge range of new concepts, architectural techniques, scientific discoveries, inventions and more. Some of these wonderful things include the telephone, the television, tarmac, the steam engine, anaesthesia, penicillin, the pedal bicycle and the decimal point!

Many famed athletes and Olympic medal winners come from Scotland, including tennis player Andy Murray, rower Katherine Grainger and cyclist Sir Chris Hoy. Scotland also has a strong history for producing influential writers, including the poet Robert Burns (you can find out more about him in VisitScotland's Rabbie for Weans eBook), JM Barrie, author of Peter Pan and Sir Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes novels.

Did you know?

In the Harry Potter series, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is thought to be located in the Highlands of Scotland.

Sweden

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Kingdom of Sweden
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Stockholm
- **AREA:** 173,860 square miles (450,295 square kilometers)
- **POPULATION:** 10,040,995
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Swedish
- **MONEY:** Swedish krona



LEFT: SWEDISH FLAG, RIGHT: SWEDISH KRONA Photograph by Scanrail, Dreamstime

HISTORY

People first came to Sweden about 10,000 years ago. For thousands of years, they were hunters and gatherers and in the first centuries A.D. they traded goods with the Roman Empire. The name Sweden comes from the warlike Svea tribe that became powerful around 500 A.D. Swedes call their land Sverige, which means "land of the Svea."

The Svea began to make raids along the coasts of northern Europe and became known as Vikings, which means "pirate" in an old Norse language. Some Swedish Vikings often stole from the people they raided and settled in their lands. Others became rich by trading goods and slaves.

Sweden elected kings until 1544, when the parliament changed the rules. The crown was then passed on to the king's descendants. King Gustav IV was forced to give up his throne when he and his allies lost Finland to Napoleon's allies in 1809. During its history, Sweden ruled both Finland and Norway.

NATURE

Ancient forests, broadleaved woodlands, mountains, and wetlands provide rich habitats for many endangered animals and birds. Swedes love the countryside and Sweden was the first country in Europe to create national parks. Today, there are 29 national parks and many nature reserves and wildlife sanctuaries.

Sweden is the center of an effort to save the critically endangered arctic fox, which is on the brink of extinction with fewer than 200 left in Europe. During the winter months, their fur turns from brown to white to match the snowy landscape. The northern forests are home to brown bears and wolverines, which are related to badgers and otters, not wolves.

Carl Von Linne, known as Carolus Linnaeus, was a well-known Swedish botanist, born in the 1700s. Linnaeus invented the method for naming plants and animals which is used today. Every living thing has a Latin name that is divided into two parts. The first part gives its group, or genus, and the second part of the name gives its kind, or species.

GEOGRAPHY



Sweden is in the geographical region known as Scandinavia in northern Europe. Lush, large forests cover half of the country and over 100,000 lakes dot the landscape. The lakes, and over 24,000 islands, are all open to the public through Sweden's tradition of right to public access.

Sweden is 977 miles (1,572 kilometers) long and is bordered by Norway on the west and Finland to the east. Three stretches of water separate Sweden from Denmark—the Skagerrak, the Kattegat, and the Öresund straits.

Sweden's Arctic north has been called the "land of the midnight sun," because during the summer months the sun never sets. Even in the capital of Stockholm in the south, the summer nights last only four hours and the sky doesn't deepen beyond twilight. But winter lasts until May and the nights are long and the days are short.

In the fall and spring, there are spectacular light shows in northern Sweden known as the "aurora borealis," or "northern lights." The dazzling green or red lights, which fill the late night sky, are caused by collisions of tiny particles high in the Earth's atmosphere.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Sweden is one of the least populated countries in Europe, with a population of less than 10 million people. Most people used to live in the countryside, but as the country became industrialized in the 1900s, many moved to the cities of Malmö, Göteborg, and Stockholm.

During the 1930s, Sweden developed the welfare system, known as "the Swedish model." Under their system, all Swedes have access to publicly financed health care, help for the unemployed, child care, schools, elder care, and at least five weeks of paid vacation per year.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The monarch is the head of state in Sweden. King Carl XVI Gustaf has largely ceremonial duties and the government is run by elected officials. There are 349 members in the Riksdag, or Swedish parliament. Members of parliament vote for a prime minister, who then appoints members of the cabinet.

Sweden is a member of the European Union, but does not use the euro as currency. They have kept their own currency, the Swedish krona, as a way to keep their identity. Sweden prides itself on being a neutral country. Since the mid-1800s and during the two World Wars, Sweden remained neutral, not fighting for one side or the other.

United Kingdom

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary democracy within a constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** London
- **POPULATION:** 67,879,000
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** English; both English and Scots Gaelic in Scotland; both English and Welsh in Wales
- **MONEY:** Pound sterling
- **AREA:** 93,630 square miles (242,500 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Thames, Severn, Trent, Mersey

HISTORY

EARLY HISTORY

Among the first Britons (people who live in the United Kingdom) were the Picts, who arrived some 10,000 years ago likely from mainland Europe. In the sixth century B.C., the Celts arrived from Europe, and the Picts moved north into Scotland. In A.D. 43, the Romans invaded and ruled for nearly 400 years. They built roads, bathhouses, and sewers.

By the sixth century A.D., German people known as Angles, Jutes, and Saxons were moving into the U.K. The Angles gave their name to England, and English people became known as Anglo-Saxons. From the 900s to the 1400s, England was ruled by Viking, Danish, and Norman invaders. Many different Celtic kingdoms maintained control throughout Ireland and Wales for hundreds of years, and the ancestors of the Picts still ruled over Scotland.

UNITING THE KINGDOM

In the 13th century, England took control of Wales. About 200 years later, in 1485, Welsh noble Henry Tudor claimed the English crown and became Henry VII, the first of five Tudor monarchs. The Welsh territory was officially united with England in 1536.

After many battles to keep its independence, Scotland eventually united with England in 1707. The union of the three nations—England, Wales, and Scotland—became the kingdom of Great Britain, ruled by Queen Anne, who became the first monarch of the newly-formed Great Britain.

The Celts who ruled over Ireland also fought to remain independent from England, which had been invading the country since the late 1100s. By the late 1600s, England had gained control of all of Ireland. Ireland officially became united with England, Scotland, and Wales in 1801, forming the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

COLONIZATION

Eager to find the wealth that Portugal and Spain had found after taking control of other lands, the U.K. began establishing colonies in what would eventually become the United States. In 1607, Jamestown, in what's now the state of Virginia, became the first permanent English settlement in the Americas.

But in the 18th century, American colonists began to rebel against British rule. They fought for their independence during the Revolutionary War, which lasted from 1775 to 1783. The Americans won the war—and their independence.

After the loss of its American colonies, the U.K. shifted its attention to Asia. It established the East India Trading Company to trade in what's now Indonesia, India, and other parts of southeast Asia. The company's control of trade in the region eventually led to the colonization of India in 1858.

By the mid-1800s, the United Kingdom was one of the most powerful nations in the world. The country built a huge overseas empire, setting up colonies throughout Africa and even Canada in North America. These colonies were part of the British Empire, which ruled more than one-quarter of the world's people by the 1900s.

THE EARLY 20th CENTURY

In the late 19th century, Germany began competing with the U.K. and other European countries to set up colonies in Africa and Asia. These tensions led to World War I in 1914. The United Kingdom—alongside France, Italy, Japan, the United States, and the Soviet Union (now called Russia)—defeated Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire to win the war in 1918.

In the middle of World War I, protestors calling for independence in Ireland staged an uprising on Easter Monday in 1916. Known as the Easter Rising, the revolt was stopped, and many of its Irish leaders were executed. But many people in Ireland still wanted to be independent from the U.K. In 1919, the Irish Republican Army, or the IRA, fought the British Army in the Irish War of Independence, which lasted until 1921.

A truce in 1921 led to the Irish Free State Act of 1922, which stated that the southern part of Ireland would become the Irish Free State, a self-governing country with some ties to the United Kingdom. Six counties in the north chose to remain part of the U.K. and became Northern Ireland. (Eventually, in 1937, the Irish Free State—now known as Ireland—became a fully independent republic. By 1949, they had no ties to the U.K.)

During Ireland's ongoing fight for independence, the U.K. found itself involved in another world war when Germany's Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party invaded Poland in 1939, starting World War II. The United Kingdom, alongside the United States and the Soviet Union, fought against Germany, Italy, and Japan (called the Axis powers). The war ended in 1945 with the Axis countries' defeat.

The United Kingdom spent a lot of money fighting and recovering from World War I and II. Unable to support and oversee its empire, it withdrew from some colonies, allowing them to become independent.

India, often referred to as “the crown jewel of the British Empire,” had been pushing for independence for decades before the world wars. Indian activist Mahatma Gandhi joined the fight in 1914 by encouraging his fellow Indians to engage in nonviolent forms of protest, such as not buying U.K. goods and refusing to pay taxes. Although the struggle for independence sometimes turned violent, Gandhi's leadership helped India become its own country in 1947.

In 1952, Elizabeth II became queen. During her 70-year reign, more than 50 countries that were colonies of the British Empire became independent. This period of history has been called the decolonization of the British Empire.

TROUBLE IN NORTHERN IRELAND

People in Northern Ireland started fighting for independence during the 1960s. Sometimes called the Troubles, the conflict was mostly between Nationalists, who wanted to leave the United Kingdom and form a united Ireland, and Unionists, who wanted Northern Ireland to remain part of the U.K. Like most of Ireland, Nationalists were Catholic; Unionists were Protestants, like many in the U.K.

The violent conflict mostly took place in Northern Ireland, but fighting occasionally happened in England and Ireland as well. Nearly 4,000 people died during the Troubles, which lasted until the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1988. Also called the Belfast Agreement, the peace talks formed a new government in Northern Ireland that would allow Unionists and Nationalists to share power as part of the United Kingdom.

BREXIT AND THE DEATH OF QUEEN ELIZABETH II

In 1973, the United Kingdom joined the European Union, or EU. Member countries—all from Europe—follow certain trade, security, immigration, and environmental laws. But some U.K. citizens didn't like that they had to follow these laws. The country voted to leave the EU in 2016 and officially left in January 2020. People around the world called the United Kingdom's departure “Brexit,” a combination of “Britain” and “exit.”

In September 2022, Queen Elizabeth II died at 96 years old after 70 years on the throne. Her son, Charles, became king. Under his reign, decolonization will likely continue—the latest country to leave the British monarchy behind was Barbados in 2021.

United Kingdom con't

GEOGRAPHY



NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAPS

The biggest part of the United Kingdom (also called the U.K.) is the island of Great Britain, which is made up of England, Wales, and Scotland. The U.K. also includes Northern Ireland, which is on another island. (South of Northern Ireland is the separate country of Ireland, which gained its independence from the U.K. in 1937.) Northern Ireland is just 12 miles from the island of Great Britain, across the North Channel of the Irish Sea.

Scotland and Wales are the most mountainous parts of the U.K. and are covered in knife-edged mountain ridges separated by deep valleys. This terrain was shaped some 20,000 years ago during the last Ice Age, when thick glaciers covered the land. When the Ice Age glaciers melted in northwest Scotland, they left behind thousands of lakes, called lochs (pronounced LOCKS). Long and narrow, some of the lochs are very deep. (Legends say that a giant monster called Nessie lives in Loch Ness in this region, also called the Scottish Highlands.)

The largest freshwater lake by surface area in the U.K., Lough Neagh (pronounced LOCK NEE), is in Northern Ireland. It stretches 20 miles long and nine miles wide. Rolling hills and plains dot the countryside of both Northern Ireland and England.



LEFT: UNITED KINGDOM FLAG
PHOTOGRAPH BY NORMAN POGSON, DREAMSTIME



RIGHT: UNITED KINGDOM POUND STERLING
PHOTOGRAPH BY PICHUNTER, DREAMSTIME

PEOPLE AND CULTURE

Many people from the United Kingdom are descendants of Celtic migrants from central Europe who arrived in the U.K. possibly as early as 1000 B.C. Other ancestors of U.K. citizens were Roman invaders, who arrived in A.D. 43, and Viking warriors, who landed in A.D. 793. (Both came from mainland Europe.)

After the end of World War II in 1945, thousands of refugees from other war-torn European countries settled in the U.K. In the 1950s and 1960s, people from places that the United Kingdom once ruled as colonies—such as Jamaica in the Caribbean, Nigeria in Africa, and India in Asia—came to the country to work.

Today, more than 80 percent of the people in the United Kingdom live in England. London, the capital of both England and the U.K., is home to just under nine million residents. Nearly half of the U.K.'s population is Christian, with most belonging to Protestant churches. The country is also home to large and growing communities of Muslims, Hindus, and Jews.

The U.K. is known all over the world for its sports and literature. Soccer, rugby, cricket, boxing, and golf were all invented in the United Kingdom. And the U.K. has produced many notable writers, including William Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Jane Austen. J.K. Rowling, the writer of the Harry Potter series, and J.R.R. Tolkien, the writer of the Lord of the Rings series, are both from the U.K.

NATURE

About 5,000 years ago, much of the United Kingdom was covered with thick forests. Over time, these woodlands were cleared by farmers and land developers—today, only about 13 percent of the U.K.'s land is forest.

The United Kingdom is a crowded country, with few truly wild places left. The most successful wildlife species are those that can live alongside people, including smaller mammals like hedgehogs, hares, and badgers. Roe deer, which are native to the country, and red deer are the largest mammals found in the U.K.

The Scottish Highlands, which are largely untouched by humans, are home to animals like the Scottish wild cat, pine martens, and golden eagles. Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland is home to some 20 species of waterfowl, including ducks, gulls, geese, and swans.

In Wales, one of the most spotted mammals is the red fox; visitors can also see Ley's Whitebeam trees, which grow only in Wales.

In England's moors—open areas with poor soil covered by grass and a purplish-flowering plant called heather—visitors can see venomous adder snakes, emperor moths, and ground-nesting birds called snipes.

The United Kingdom's 7,723 miles of coastline, ranging from tall cliffs to beaches to marshes, provide homes for seabirds like puffins and great skuas. Minke whales, bottlenose dolphins, and orcas can be spotted in the waters surrounding the U.K.

Germany

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Federal Republic of Germany
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Federal republic
- **CAPITAL:** Berlin
- **POPULATION:** 80,457,737
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** German
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 134,838 square miles (349,223 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Rhine, Elbe, Main, Danube



LEFT: GERMAN FLAG, RIGHT: EURO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMTIME

HISTORY

Humans settled in northern Europe about 10,000 years ago, after the end of the last Ice Age. The first people to speak a language similar to modern German probably lived in the area about 5,000 years ago. It was still thousands of years, though, before Germany was created.

Early Germany was a patchwork of small states ruled by dukes and kings. But in 1871, the country was united, through force and alliances, by a politician named Otto von Bismarck.

In the late 19th century Germany began competing with other European countries to set up colonies in Africa and Asia. These tensions led to World War I in 1914, the worst conflict the world had ever seen. Germany and its allies lost the war to Britain, France, the Soviet Union (now called Russia), and the United States.

Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party came to power in 1933 promising to make Germany great again. In 1939, Hitler invaded Poland, starting World War II. During the war, Hitler created camps in Germany where millions of Jewish people and others were murdered. The war ended in 1945 with the Germans' defeat and Hitler committing suicide.

After World War II, Germany was divided into West and East. The country became the center of a standoff between the Soviet Union and Western powers. This confrontation, which lasted 44 years, was called the Cold War. In 1989, East Germany opened its borders and the Cold War came to an end.

GEOGRAPHY



Germany's central and southern regions have forested hills and mountains cut through by the Danube, Main, and Rhine river valleys. In the north, the landscape flattens out to a wide plain that stretches to the North Sea. Between these extremes, Germany is a country of incredible variety.

Germany's location at the heart of Europe has shaped its history both for good and bad. It borders nine neighbors, more than any other European country.

Germany's largest wooded area, and its most famous, is in the southwest near the Swiss border. This is the Black Forest, a mountainous region full of pines and fir trees. This forest contains the source of the Danube, one of Europe's longest rivers.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

The German government works hard to protect the country's wildlife. There are 97 nature reserves in Germany, the biggest of which is the Black Forest. Despite these efforts, though, many species are at risk of extinction, including certain species of whales, beavers, and minks.

Germany's major unspoiled habitats are in two main regions. The flat northern coast is home to sea life and wading birds, while the forested hills and mountains in the south are the best place to find wildcats, boar, ibex, and other large mammals.

The lakes and wetlands along Germany's coastlines are important stopover points for many migrating birds. The government has set up reserves for the birds' protection.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

After losing World War II, Germany was in ruins. West Germany recovered to become Europe's richest country, but East Germany, under communist control, fell far behind. After reunification in 1989, Germany spent billions of dollars to modernize the East.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Today almost one in every ten Germans comes from a foreign country. That is more than at any time in history. The largest minority are Turkish, who started coming in the 1950s to work. About two-thirds of Germans are Christians.

Germany has been called the "Land of Poets and Thinkers." Germans are famous in all forms of art, but particularly classical music. Germany's famous composers include Bach, Brahms, Schumann, Wagner, and Beethoven.

Greece

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Hellenic Republic
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary republic
- **CAPITAL:** Athens
- **POPULATION:** 10,761,523
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Greek
- **MONEY:** Euro
- **AREA:** 50,942 square miles (131,940 square kilometers)
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Greek



LEFT: GREEK FLAG, RIGHT: EUROPhotograph by Scanrail, Dreamstime
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCANRAIL, DREAMSTIME

HISTORY

The first great civilization in Greece was the Minoan culture on the island of Crete around 2000 B.C. Wall paintings found at the ruins of the palace Knossos show people doing backflips over a charging bull. The Minoans were conquered by the Mycenaeans from the mainland in 1450 B.C.

During ancient times the country was divided into city-states, which were ruled by noblemen. The largest were Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Corinth. Each state controlled the territory around a single city. They were often at war with each other.

Athens became the most powerful, and in 508 B.C., the people instituted a new system of rule by the people called democracy. But during that time, only men could vote!

The first Olympic Games were held in the southern city of Olympia in 700 B.C. to honor Zeus, the king of the gods. Only men could compete in the events such as sprinting, long jump, discus, javelin, wrestling, and chariot racing. The games were banned by the Romans in A.D. 393, but began again in Athens in 1896.

Greece was ruled by foreigners for over 2,000 years beginning with the Romans conquering the Greeks in the 2nd century. Then, after almost 400 years under Turkish rule, Greece won independence in 1832.

GOVERNMENT

Greece abolished their monarchy in 1975 and became a parliamentary republic. Under the new constitution, there is a president and a prime minister. The prime minister has the most power, and is the leader of the party that has the most seats in the parliament. The president selects cabinet ministers who run government departments.

The parliament, called the Vouli, has only one house with 300 members who are elected every four years. Greece became part of the European Union in 1981.

GEOGRAPHY



Greece has the longest coastline in Europe and is the southernmost country in Europe. The mainland has rugged mountains, forests, and lakes, but the country is well known for the thousands of islands dotting the blue Aegean Sea to the east, the Mediterranean Sea to the south, and the Ionian Sea to the west.

The country is divided into three geographical regions: the mainland, the islands, and Peloponnese, the peninsula south of the mainland.

The Pindus mountain range on the mainland contains one of the world's deepest gorges, Vikos Gorge, which plunges 3,600 feet (1,100 meters). Mount Olympus is Greece's highest mountain at 9,570 feet (2,917 meters) above sea level. Ancient Greeks believed it was the home of the gods. Mount Olympus became the first national park in Greece.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Family life is a very important part of life in Greece. Children often live with their parents even after they get married. Greeks live long lives and it is thought that their varied diet of olives, olive oil, lamb, fish, squid, chickpeas, and lots of fruits and vegetables keep them healthy.

Nearly two-thirds of the people live in large cities. Athens is the largest city, with over 3.7 million people crowding the metropolis. Nefos, the Greek term for smog, is a big problem in Athens. The Parthenon, the temple to goddess Athena atop the Acropolis, is deteriorating due to pollution and acid rain.

Olive trees have been cultivated in Greece for over 6,000 years. Every village has its own olive groves.

NATURE

Most of the country was forested at one time. Over the centuries, the forests were cut down for firewood, lumber, and to make room for farms. Today, forests can be found mainly in the Pindus and Rhodope ranges.

Greece has ten national parks and there is an effort to protect natural and historic landmarks. Marine parks help protect the habitats of two of Europe's most endangered sea creatures, the loggerhead turtle and monk seal. The long coastline and clear water make Greece an ideal location to spot sea stars, sea anemones, sponges, and seahorses hiding in the seaweed.

The Greek landscape is covered by maquis, a tangle of thorny shrubs that don't need a lot of water. These plants include fragrant herbs such as thyme, rosemary, oregano, and bay and myrtle trees. Bird watching is popular in Greece where geese, ducks, and swallows stop over during their migration from Africa to Europe.

Haiti

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Haiti
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Semi-presidential republic
- **CAPITAL:** Port-au-Prince
- **POPULATION:** 11,562,675
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** French, Haitian Creole
- **MONEY:** Gourde
- **AREA:** 10,714 square miles (27,750 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Massif de la Selle, Massif du Nord



LEFT: HAITIAN FLAG
DREAMSTIME



RIGHT: HAITIAN GOURDE
PHOTOGRAPH BY OLEG_MIT, SHUTTERSTOCK

GEOGRAPHY



Located between the Caribbean Sea and the North Atlantic Ocean, Haiti occupies the western one-third of the island of Hispaniola. The Dominican Republic borders Haiti on the eastern side of the island. Haiti's closest neighbors include Jamaica to the west and Cuba to the northwest.

Hayti means "land of the mountains" in the Indigenous, or native, Taino language. The country's highest peak, Pic la Selle, is part of the Massif de la Selle range located in southeastern Haiti and reaches nearly 9,000 feet (2,715 meters).

The island sits at the edge of a huge geological slab of rock just below the Earth's surface, called a tectonic plate; when the plate shifts, it can cause an earthquake. (This article [explains more about earthquakes](#).) Because of Haiti's position on the edge of the plate, the country has a long history of very strong earthquakes that cause major damage. A massive magnitude 7.2 earthquake struck the country in August 2021. Experts estimate that over 2,000 people were killed and nearly 150,000 buildings were damaged or destroyed.

NATURE

Haiti's tropical climate means warm temperatures for most of the year. While much of the country is mountainous, the coastline is flat and dotted with coconut trees. Royal palm trees are common here, too, and can reach up to 60 feet (18.3 meters) tall. But as Haiti's population has grown, many of these trees have been cut down to make way for development. Wood is also frequently burned for fuel.

Because much of its forest coverage has been stripped, Haiti's surface cannot stop floodwaters caused by strong storms and hurricanes from reaching most of the country. This causes massive damage often, because hurricanes are common in the warm ocean waters surrounding the island. Recent storms include Hurricane Sandy in 2012 and Hurricane Matthew in 2016, both of which caused flooding and landslides, leading to the loss of homes for thousands of people.

Haiti is slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Maryland, but it has several diverse climate zones, including dry forests where several species of cacti grow and coastal mangrove forests where American flamingos can be spotted. The country's two national parks—La Visite and Pic Macaya—each contain tropical and pine forests, which are home to a variety of species, including the rhinoceros iguana, the Haitian boa, and Haiti's national bird: the Hispaniolan trogon.

Divers off the coast of Haiti can see West Indian manatees, bottlenose dolphins, and Caribbean reef sharks.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Haiti is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 1,000 people for every square mile (or 380 people for every square kilometer). Much of the population lives in rural areas working as farmers or laborers, but city population numbers are increasing. Haiti's capital, Port-au-Prince, is its most populous city, with nearly three million residents.

Most Haitians are of African origin, but a small number are of European descent. Haitian Creole, a mixture of French and African languages, is one of the country's official languages and is spoken by the majority of the population. Though French is also an official language, only about 10 percent of Haitians speak it fluently.

Many Haitians practice voodoo, which combines West African spiritualism with the worship of Roman Catholic saints. A common saying in the country is that Haitians are 70 percent Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and a hundred percent voodoo. In 2003, voodoo was declared an official religion. Today, marriages and other ceremonies held in the voodoo tradition are recognized by the government.

The traditional Haitian diet includes locally grown vegetables and fruits like cabbage, mango, and guava, as well as spicy meat dishes. Popular meals include *griot* (spiced, marinated cubes of pork), black rice made from mushrooms called djon-djon, and Haitian patties (savory pies filled with chicken, beef, or fish).

Haiti con't

HISTORY

Hispaniola has been inhabited since around 5000 B.C., when groups of Native Americans likely arrived from Central and South America. Some of these early settlers included the Taíno, whose cave paintings scattered throughout the country have become national symbols of Haiti and popular tourist attractions.

Explorer Christopher Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola in 1492 and claimed it as a Spanish colony. Soon hundreds of Spanish settlers arrived. They killed most of the island natives and brought over enslaved Africans to work in the colony.

By the 1600s, the French had taken over much of the colony, which they called Saint Domingue. They increased production of many crops such as coffee, cotton, and sugarcane. But the enslaved people of Saint Domingue revolted against French rule in 1791. After what many historians refer to as the largest and most successful rebellion by enslaved people, the islanders finally declared their independence from France in 1804 and changed the name of the country to Haiti.

These Haitians had created the first independent nation in the Caribbean. (The others were colonized, or ruled, by countries like Spain and France.) Haiti was also the second democracy in the Western Hemisphere (after the United States), and the first Black republic—or a government not led by a monarch—in the world. But because the population had been ruled by outsiders for so long, the revolution left them without a system for governing, and years of struggle followed. By 1809, the eastern two-thirds of the island—the part that would eventually become the Dominican Republic—was returned to Spain.

Presidents did not remain in power very long in Haiti—by 1915, multiple revolutions had overthrown the government many times. From 1915 until 1934, the country was occupied by U.S. Marines who were establishing a base to protect the entrances to the Panama Canal, a waterway in the Central American country of Panama that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Starting in 1957, the Duvalier family began its rule of Haiti. Francois "Papa Doc" Duvalier was elected president that year but became a dictator, refusing to give up his leadership role until his death in 1971. Haitians voted to approve his 19-year-old son, Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier, as his successor. The younger Duvalier ruled Haiti from 1971 to 1986.

Like his father's rule, the younger Duvalier's term was marked by extreme poverty. People who didn't agree with his actions were often killed, and many Haitians fled the country to escape the harsh living conditions. Finally, Duvalier's government was overthrown in 1986.

Jean-Bertrand Aristide was elected president in 1990 during Haiti's first free and peaceful election. His presidency lasted until 1995, when Rene Preval was elected as his successor. Aristide was re-elected president in 2000. For the next four years, the country experienced violence, political corruption, and food shortages. In 2004, Aristide was forced out of the country by protesters who were hoping for new leadership. A series of new presidents followed, but most were controversial leaders like Aristide.

In 2017, Jovenel Moïse, a former banana exporter, was elected president. During his time in office, he was also accused of being a corrupt ruler by some of his fellow Haitians. In February 2021, protestors held demonstrations demanding that Moïse step down from the presidency. He refused. On July 7 of the same year, Moïse was assassinated in his home.

Two days before his assassination, Moïse had appointed Ariel Henry, a doctor who went to school in the United States, to be Haiti's prime minister. Henry will oversee the government until the country holds an election for its next president on November 7, 2021.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Haiti's government is a semi-presidential republic, with a president acting as the country's leader and a prime minister reporting to the president. A president is elected to office every five years by a majority vote from the people of Haiti. The president appoints the country's prime minister.

Haiti is the poorest country in the Caribbean and among the poorest countries in the world, with some 60 percent of the population living in poverty. The government relies on foreign aid from countries like the United States and Canada, which includes money for food, healthcare, and reconstruction efforts after major weather disasters.

Most of the Haitian population works in farming. Clothing factories also employ thousands of Haitians, mainly women, to manufacture products that are exported, or sent, around the world. Haiti's other major exports include coffee, mangoes, sugarcane, rice, corn, and wood.



La Citadelle Laferrière, a fortress, was built in northern Haiti in the 1800s.
PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES P. BLAIR

Croatia

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Croatia
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary Democracy
- **CAPITAL:** Zagreb
- **POPULATION:** 4,270,480
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Croatian
- **MONEY:** Kuna
- **AREA:** 21,621 square miles (56,594 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Dinaric Alps, Biokovo
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Drava, Danube



LEFT: CROATIAN FLAG, RIGHT: CROATIAN KUNA Photograph by Ivan Smuk, Shutterstock
PHOTOGRAPHS BY IVAN SMUK. SHUTTERSTOCK

HISTORY

The first Croats settled in the area that is today called Croatia around A.D. 500. They ruled themselves for many years, but decided to become part of the Hungarian Empire in 1091. When the Ottoman Empire began to expand in the 15th century, they became concerned they would be taken over by the Ottomans, so they asked Archduke Ferdinand if they could join the Austrian Habsburg Empire.

In 1868 Croatia again went under the rule of Hungary. This lasted until World War II when it became part of Yugoslavia. The war brought terrible hardships on the country under German and Italian rule. When it ended, the Communist Party took control over the country of Yugoslavia.

In the early 1990s, communism collapsed throughout Eastern Europe. Yugoslavia became a place of much turmoil as different ethnic groups began to fight for power and independence. Croatia declared its independence from Yugoslavia and civil war erupted. War raged for many years between the Croats and the Serbians. In December 1995, the Dayton Agreement was signed, bringing peace to the area at last.

NATURE

Croatia's varied geographic regions—plains, mountain forests, and coastline—are reflected in its varied animal life.

Rabbits, foxes, boars, wildcats, and wild sheep are found in the plains areas, while wolves and even bears can be found in the inland forests. Sea life in the Adriatic is rich as well, with many coral reefs and underwater caves serving as habitats.

GEOGRAPHY



Located in southeast Europe, Croatia is geographically diverse. The crescent-shaped country features low mountains and highlands near the Adriatic coastline, flat plains that hug the Hungarian border, and a multitude of islands.

In mountainous regions, winters are cold and snowy and the summers are mild. The country's coastal areas have a Mediterranean climate with hot, sunny summers and mild winters. Over a thousand islands are found off this coastline. Many are major tourist areas including the Dalmatian coast.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Several different ethnic groups can be found in the republic. Croats are by far the largest ethnic group in Croatia. Serbs make up the largest minority group; however, their numbers fell after the 1990s war of independence—from more than one-tenth of the population before the war to less than half that many in 2001.

In addition to the Croats and the Serbs, there are small groups of Bosnian Muslims, Hungarians, Italians, and Slovenes, as well as a few thousand Albanians, Austrians, Bulgarians, Czechs, Germans, and other nationalities.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

The Croatian president is elected by popular vote to a five-year term and is head of state. The prime minister is head of government. The president appoints the prime minister, who must also be approved by parliament. Croatia's parliament consists of a 151-seat House of Representatives.

The 1991-95 civil war between Croats and Serbs caused massive damage to cities and industries. War halted the tourist trade and drastically cut industrial output, including a lucrative ship-building business. Since the war, Croatia has progressed politically and economically. In July of 2013 it was accepted into the European Union though it still retains its own currency, the Kuna.

Iran

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Iran
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Islamic republic
- **CAPITAL:** Tehran
- **POPULATION:** 83,024,745
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Farsi
- **MONEY:** Rial
- **AREA:** 636,372 square miles (1,648,105 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Elburz, Zagros
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Karun, Karkeh, Zayandeh



LEFT: IRANIAN FLAG, RIGHT: RIAL Photograph by Matthew Trommer, Dreamstime

HISTORY

Iran is one of the oldest nations in the world, with a history dating back tens of thousands of years. The country's first great city, Susa, was built on the central plateau around 3200 B.C.

In 559 B.C., the Persian Empire arose in southwestern Iran and conquered the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. The empire eventually extended from the Mediterranean Sea to what is now Pakistan, but it was conquered by the Greeks in 330 B.C.

Around 260 B.C., nomads called Parthians ousted the Greeks and ruled for some 500 years. The Sassanids came into power in A.D. 224, and in A.D. 642, Persia became part of the Islamic Empire. In 1501, the kings, or shahs, of the Safavid Empire began their reign.

In the late 18th century, foreign powers, including Russia and Britain, took control of parts of Persia. In 1921, a Persian army officer named Reza Khan took control and sought to end outside influence. In 1935, he renamed the country Iran. His son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, became shah in 1941.

In 1979, many Iranians who felt Pahlavi was corrupt forced him to flee, ending the reign of the shahs in Iran. Since then, religious leaders have ruled the country. The first was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose ten years in power were marked by a long war with Iraq and tensions with the United States and many other nations. Khomeini died in 1989, but much of those tensions still exist today.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Strong religious beliefs have been part of Iranians' lives for thousands of years. Almost all Iranians are Muslim, or followers of Islam. The religion is central to daily life.

Iran has a long history of scholarship that has created a rich culture of art, literature, poetry, music, cuisine, and architecture. Ancient Iranian thinkers wrote influential texts on philosophy and medicine, and it was an Iranian mathematician who invented algebra. Iran's universities are among the most respected in the Middle East.

GEOGRAPHY



Iran (pronounced ee-RAHN), formerly known as Persia, is situated at the crossroads of Central Asia, South Asia, and the Arab states of the Middle East. This strategic position—and its access to the Persian Gulf in the south—have made Iran an important country throughout its history.

Much of Iran is cut off from the outside world by a beautiful but often lonely landscape. High, rugged mountains create a barrier with Iran's neighbors in the west, and the eastern region is covered by a barren, salty desert.

In Iran's north, a narrow, fertile strip borders the Caspian Sea, and in the south, lowlands rim the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. Most people in Iran live along the edges of a high plateau that runs through the middle of the country.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

NATURE

Not long ago, Iran was home to many lions, tigers, and other big cats. Unfortunately these sleek hunters are now very rare, and some species have gone extinct. Only a handful of Asiatic cheetahs and Persian leopards remain.

Iran has several reserves and parks where wildlife thrives. One, called Kavir National Park, is located in the north-central region and is known as "Little Africa" because its plants and animals resemble those of Africa. This park is home to Iran's only cheetahs.

Iran's mountains in the north and west have dense forests that offer habitat for brown bears, wild goats, wolves, and leopards. The country's central plateau is home to deer, gazelles, hyenas, and jackals, among other animals.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Iran's government is controlled by a religious figure called the supreme leader, who is appointed by a group of Islamic clerics called the Assembly of Experts. A president, elected by the people, is second in command.

Iran has extensive oil reserves, but its economy has been hit hard by a trade ban imposed by the United States since the shah was ousted in 1979. Allegations that Iran supports terrorism and a belief that it is developing nuclear weapons has led to further isolation in recent years.

Thailand

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Kingdom of Thailand
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Bangkok
- **POPULATION:** 68,615,858
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Thai
- **MONEY:** Baht
- **AREA:** 513,115 square kilometers (198,115 square miles)



LEFT: THAI FLAG, RIGHT: BAHT
PHOTOGRAPHS BY TOM HOENIG, AGE FOTOSTOCK

HISTORY

Around 2000 B.C. people built settlements in the hillsides of Thailand. The first one is thought to be Ben Chiang. Pieces of pottery, tools, and jewelry from 200 B.C. to 300 A.D. have been dug up in this area.

Thailand, which means “land of the free,” was known as Siam until 1939.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Known as Siam until 1939, Thailand is the only Southeast Asian country never to have been taken over by a European power. A revolution in 1932 led to a constitutional monarchy.

The king is the leader of the country. The prime minister is picked from among members of the House of Representatives, but is appointed by the king.

Agriculture and tourism are the most important industries in Thailand.

In December 2004, the catastrophic Indian Ocean tsunami hit Thailand, but the country's economy has largely recovered from the disaster's effect.

GEOGRAPHY



Thailand is in the heart of Southeast Asia. Cambodia and Laos border the country to the east and northeast, and Myanmar lies to the northwest. To the west is the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, southeast of Burma. The long southern region, connecting with Malaysia, is hilly and forested. The highest mountains are in northern Thailand.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

About 90 percent of the people are Buddhist, but about three million Muslims live in the south near the border with Malaysia.

Thai children go to elementary school for six years. Then they may attend high school for another six years, but their families must pay for the education. Boys begin military training in ninth grade.

Food in Thailand is influenced by Chinese and Indian cultures. Most Thai dishes are spicy and many common dishes include hot chilies, lemongrass, basil, ginger, and coconut milk.

Thai farmers cultivate mulberry trees that feed silkworms. The worms create silk, which is made into beautiful silk clothing in Thailand, France, and the United States.

Bangkok is called the Venice of the East because there are 83 canals. As many as 10,000 boats full of fruits, vegetables, and fish crowd the canals and create a floating market.

The city of Bangkok is home to many impressive Buddhist structures featuring gold-layered spires, graceful pagodas, and giant Buddha statues.

NATURE

Rain falls almost every day between the months of May and September. The moist and humid weather encourages the diverse and abundant wildlife in Thailand.

Lotus flowers are common and the favorite flower in Thailand. Lotus flowers live above the surface, but they are rooted in the mud. There are many flowering trees and shrubs, and fruit trees. In the jungle, one can find carnivorous (meat-eating) plants such as the mysterious insect-eating pitcher plant.

The deep forests are home to tigers, elephants, wild ox, leopards, and the Malayan tapir. The tapir is covered in black fur on the first half of its body and white fur to the rear. Cobras and crocodiles are also found in Thailand.

Singapore

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Republic of Singapore
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary republic
- **CAPITAL:** Singapore
- **POPULATION:** 5,995,991
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** English, Mandarin, Malay, Tamil
- **MONEY:** Singapore dollar
- **AREA:** 278 square miles (719 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Singapore, Kallang, Geylang, Rochor, Sungei Jurong, Sungei Serangoon



LEFT: SINGAPOREAN FLAG, RIGHT: SINGAPOREAN DOLLAR Photograph by railwayfx / Adobe Stock
PHOTOGRAPH BY RAILWAYFX / ADOBE STOCK (LEFT) AND PHOTOGRAPH BY HENNING MARQUARDT / ADOBE STOCK (RIGHT)

GEOGRAPHY

Located in Southeast Asia, Singapore consists of one 30-mile-long island (called Pulau Ujong, or mainland Singapore) surrounded by 62 smaller islands. The country's neighbors include Malaysia to the north and Indonesia to the south. Most of Singapore is flat, with more than half of Pulau Ujong only 50 feet (15 meters) above sea level. However, the middle of the island includes Bukit Timah Hill, the highest natural point in Singapore. It stands 545 feet (166 meters)—about the height of a 44-story building.

PEOPLE & CULTURE

During the 19th and 20th centuries, Singapore was known as a place to trade goods and attracted people from other countries, including China. Today about 75 percent of the population is of Chinese descent; the rest are mostly Malay and Indian. Buddhism is widely practiced religion in Singapore, followed by Christianity, Islam, Taoism, and Hinduism.

The population of Singapore has more than doubled since 1980, making the country one of the most crowded islands in the world. But low crime, affordable public transportation, and a technologically advanced capital known for towering skyscrapers help the country consistently rank high for life satisfaction. People living there also have a high life expectancy: 82 years.

Food is important in Singapore culture. In fact, a common greeting is "Have you eaten?" Popular dishes include a crispy flatbread with fish curry called *roti prata*, and *bak kut teh*, pork ribs served in a peppery broth.

HISTORY

The original name of the island, Tumasik (or Temasek), was taken from the Javanese word *tasek*, which means "sea." (Javanese is spoken on the island of Java, in Indonesia.) For centuries, Tumasik was a stopping place for sailors traveling between India and China. The island was mostly settled by fishermen and pirates.

During the 14th century, Tumasik earned its new name, "Singapura" (meaning "The Lion City"), after a visiting prince spotted what he thought was an Asiatic lion on the island. (The animal once lived across Asia but is now found only in India.) Singapore became a British trading colony in 1819, and officially came under British rule in 1826.

The Japanese took control of Singapore in 1942 during World War II but handed back ownership to the British once they lost the war. In 1959, Singapore became self-governing, though Britain still controlled the country's military. The country finally gained full independence as the Republic of Singapore in 1965.

NATURE

Rain falls somewhere on the hot, tropical island every day of the year. Singapore was once almost entirely covered in rainforests, but 95 percent have been cut down to build bigger cities. Most of Singapore's beaches are human-made—the natural ones were built over to extend cities, called land reclamation. This includes beaches on Sentosa Island, a popular tourist destination.

Today most of the wildlife on mainland Singapore lives in reserves like the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve and the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. Visitors can see animals like crab-eating macaques, reticulated pythons, and emerald doves. The smaller islands boast marine life such as giant clams, Caribbean reef octopuses, black-tip reef sharks, and seahorses.

GOVERNMENT

Singapore is a parliamentary republic. The Parliament is the legislative branch of the government; it's led by a president, who—along with Parliament members—is elected by the public. The president appoints a prime minister to lead the Cabinet, which is the executive branch. The prime minister is the head of the government, and the president mostly represents Singapore at ceremonies around the world. In 2017, the country elected its first female president.

Singapore has one of the strongest economies in Southeast Asia. Top businesses include banking and manufacturing of cars and computers. The country has one of the lowest unemployment rates, as well as one of the highest percentage of millionaires.

Vietnam

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Socialist Republic of Vietnam
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Socialist republic
- **CAPITAL:** Hanoi
- **POPULATION:** 97,040,334
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Vietnamese
- **MONEY:** Dong
- **AREA:** 127,123 square miles (329,247 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGE:** Annam Cordiller
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Mekong, Red, Ma, Perfume



LEFT: VIETNAMESE FLAG, RIGHT: VIETNAMESE DONG Photograph by Oleg Mitiukhin, Dreamstime

HISTORY

Vietnam's first civilizations arose in the Red River Valley some 5,000 years ago. These northern tribes flourished until 207 B.C., when their region was conquered by a Chinese lord, who established a kingdom called Nam Viet.

In 111 B.C., Nam Viet became part of the Chinese empire, which ruled the north until A.D. 939, when a Vietnamese commander named Ngo Quyen organized a revolt that drove the Chinese out. Later dynasties renamed the country Dai Viet and gradually extended their territory south. By the mid-1500s, Dai Viet was divided between rival kingdoms: the Trinh in the north and the Nguyen in the south.

In 1802, a Nguyen lord, with the help of the French, defeated the Trinh and renamed the country Vietnam. By 1890, however, France had taken over Vietnam.

Japan took control briefly during World War II, and when the war ended with Japan's defeat in 1945, Ho Chi Minh, the leader of the Vietnamese Communist Party, declared Vietnam an independent nation. French attempts to retake Vietnam led to war with the communist Vietnamese, called Viet Minh. Fighting ended in 1954 with the partition of the country into communist North and non-communist South Vietnam. In 1957, communist rebels in the south, called Viet Cong, rose up. War between the North and South ensued, and other countries, including the United States, Russia, and China, soon became involved. The fighting lasted until 1975, when the communists overran the south and took its capital, Saigon.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Vietnam is a socialist state governed by the Communist Party of Vietnam. A president, chosen by the National Assembly, is head of state and commander of the armed forces. An appointed prime minister runs the government.

Vietnam's main exports include crude oil, seafood, rice, shoes, wooden products, machinery, electronics, coffee, and clothing. Between 1975 and the late 1980s, Vietnam traded mainly with other communist countries, but since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990, it has expanded trade with other nations.

GEOGRAPHY



Vietnam is a long, narrow nation shaped like the letter S. It is in Southeast Asia on the eastern edge of the peninsula known as Indochina. Its neighbors include China to the north and Laos and Cambodia to the west. The South China Sea lies to the east and south. The mountains of the Annam Cordillera rise over most of the western side of Vietnam, while a thousand-mile (1,600-kilometer) coastline dominates the east.

At its narrowest point, Vietnam is only 30 miles (48 kilometers) wide. Two of Vietnam's largest rivers, the Mekong in the south and the Red in the north, end at the South China Sea in huge swampy plains called deltas. These regions are home to most of the country's people and provide fertile ground to grow rice and many other crops.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Most Vietnamese people live in the countryside, mainly in the river delta regions of the north and south. Recently though, people have begun to move to the main cities of Ho Chi Minh (formerly Saigon) and Hanoi.

The most popular sports in Vietnam include soccer, table tennis, volleyball, and martial arts.

Vietnamese food is a blend of Chinese and Thai styles and features seafood and homegrown fruits and vegetables.

As a communist country, Vietnam has no official religion. But people are free to worship if they want to, and many follow what's called the "Three Teachings" of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism.

NATURE

Vietnam's mountainous terrain, forests, wetlands, and long coastline contain many different habitats that support a great variety of wildlife. Some 270 types of mammals, 180 reptiles, 80 amphibians, and 800 bird species reside in Vietnam.

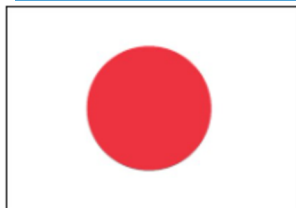
Many rare and unusual animals live in Vietnam, including giant catfish, Indochinese tigers, Saola antelopes, and Sumatran rhinos. The government has set up 30 parks and reserves to protect its animals, but their survival is in doubt because much of their habitat has been cleared for lumber or to grow crops.

Tropical forests once covered most of Vietnam, but over the past few hundred years, logging has reduced the forest cover to only about 19 percent. The government has launched a replanting program in an attempt to restore these woodlands.

Japan

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Japan
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Parliamentary government with a constitutional monarchy
- **CAPITAL:** Tokyo
- **POPULATION:** 126,168,156
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** Japanese
- **MONEY:** Japanese yen
- **AREA:** 145,883 square miles (377,835 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Japanese Alps
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Biwa, Inawashiro, Kasumigaura



LEFT: JAPANESE FLAG, RIGHT: JAPANESE YEN Photography by Torsakarinn, Dreamstime

HISTORY

People first came to Japan about 30,000 years ago. At the time, the main islands were connected to Siberia and Korea by bridges of dry land, so people crossed on foot. The first society, called the Jomon culture, arose about 12,000 years ago. Around the same time, the Ainu people arrived by boat from Siberia.

The Jomon and Ainu survived for thousands of years, hunting, fishing, and gathering plants. In 300 B.C., the Yayoi people came to Honshu Island from Korea and China. They were skilled weavers, tool makers, and farmers who began cultivating rice in flooded paddy fields.

In 660 B.C., Japan's first emperor, Jimmu Tenno, came to power. Emperors controlled Japan until the 12th century A.D., when military rulers, called shoguns, took control and ruled by might.

Europeans first arrived in Japan in 1543, bringing guns and Christianity. In 1635, the ruling shogun closed Japan to foreigners and forbade Japanese to travel abroad. This isolation lasted more than 200 years. In 1868, the shoguns were overthrown and emperors returned. This was a time of great change and modernization for Japan.

During World War I (1914-1917), Japan fought on the side of the U.S. But on December 7, 1941, Japan bombed the United States navy fleet at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and the U.S. entered World War II. From 1941-1945, Japan's military leaders fought against the U.S. and the allied forces. In August 1945, the U.S. dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, killing about 115,000 people. Japan surrendered a few days later.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

Japan is the only country in the world with a reigning emperor. Emperors have no real power, but they are still revered as a symbol of the country's traditions and unity.

World War II devastated Japan's economy. But the Japanese people's hard work and clever innovation turned it around, making it the second largest economy in the world. Japan's high-tech industry makes some of the most popular electronic products in the world.

GEOGRAPHY



Japan is an archipelago, or string of islands, on the eastern edge of Asia. There are four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku, and Kyushu. There are also nearly 4,000 smaller islands! Japan's nearest mainland neighbors are the Siberian region of Russia in the north and Korea and China farther south.

Almost four-fifths of Japan is covered with mountains. The Japanese Alps run down the center of the largest island, Honshu. The highest peak is Mount Fuji, a cone-shaped volcano considered sacred by many Japanese.

Japan can be a dangerous place. Three of the tectonic plates that form Earth's crust meet nearby and often move against each other, causing earthquakes. More than a thousand earthquakes hit Japan every year. Japan also has about 200 volcanoes, 60 of which are active.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

The Japanese are famous for their willingness to work very hard. Children are taught to show respect for others, especially parents and bosses. They learn to do what's best for their family or company and worry less about their own needs.

Japanese food is very different from food in Western countries. There is lots of rice, fish, and vegetables, but little meat. With little fat or dairy, this diet is very healthy, which helps Japanese people live, on average, longer than any other people in the world.

NATURE

The Japanese people have a deep affection for the beauty of the landscape. The ancient Shinto religion says natural features like mountains, waterfalls, and forests have their own spirits, like souls.

Most of Japan is covered by countryside. But with more than 100 million people living in such a small place, wildlife has suffered.

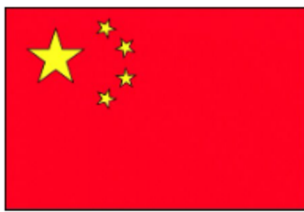
Pollution is now tightly controlled, but road building and other human activities have harmed natural habitats. About 136 species in Japan are listed as endangered.

The warm Tsushima Current flows from the south into the Sea of Japan, where it meets a colder current from the north. The mixing of waters makes the seas around Japan very rich in fish and other sea life.

China

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** People's Republic of China
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Communist state
- **CAPITAL:** Beijing (Peking)
- **POPULATION:** 1,397,897,720
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGES:** Standard Chinese, Mandarin
- **MONEY:** Yuan (or renminbi)
- **AREA:** 3,705,405 square miles (9,596,960 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Himalaya



LEFT: CHINESE FLAG



RIGHT: YUAN

Photograph by Asafa, Dreamstime

HISTORY

China is the home of one of the world's oldest civilizations, but it has only recently become a "modern" nation. In the last 20 years, China has changed faster than any other country in the world.

Chinese history is divided into dynasties, each of which marks the period when a line of emperors ruled. The first empire was the Qin dynasty and began in 221 B.C. The last emperor was overthrown in 1912, and China became a republic. The communist government began its rule in 1949 following a civil war with the Chinese Nationalists.

Ancient China was a land of invention. For centuries, China was way ahead of most other countries in science and technology, astronomy, and math. The Chinese invented paper, the magnetic compass, printing, porcelain, silk, and gunpowder, among other things.

GOVERNMENT & ECONOMY

China is an authoritarian state ruled by a very powerful central government. A huge workforce and lots of natural resources have driven economic change. This has forced the communist government to permit more economic and personal freedoms, but it has come at a huge cost to the environment.

Many experts predict that the 21st century will be the "Chinese century." Whether or not that proves to be true, there is no doubt that what happens in China will affect many other nations.

GEOGRAPHY



Stretching 3,100 miles (5,000 kilometers) from east to west and 3,400 miles (5,500 kilometers) from north to south, China is a large country with widely varying landscapes. Its territory includes mountains, high plateaus, sandy deserts, and dense forests.

One-third of China's land area is made up of mountains. The tallest mountain on Earth, Mount Everest, sits on the border between China and Nepal.

China has thousands of rivers. The Yangtze and the Yellow Rivers are the most important. At 3,915 miles (6,300 kilometers) long, the Yangtze is the world's third largest river.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

With a population of 1.4 billion, China has more people than any other country on Earth. About a third of the population lives in cities. The rest of the people live in the country.

Arts and crafts have a long history in China. Thousands of years ago the Chinese were some of the first people to use silk, jade, bronze, wood, and paper to make art. The artistic writing called calligraphy was invented in China.

Much of China's modern beliefs and philosophies are based on the teachings of a government official who lived nearly 3,000 years ago. Kongfuzi, also known as Confucius, taught people the value of such things as morality, kindness, and education.

NATURE

China's diverse habitats are home to hundreds of species of animals and plants. More than 3,800 species of fish and hundreds of amphibians and reptile species live in the rivers, lakes, and coastal waters.

China's forest wildlife is threatened by logging and clear-cutting (clearing the land of all trees) for farmland. Expanding deserts in the north also shrink animal habitats. The Chinese government has created more than 1,200 reserves to protect plant and animal species.

The giant panda lives in the misty mountains of southwest China and nowhere else on Earth. They eat bamboo and usually live near stands of the woody evergreen plant. Pandas have been hunted and only about 1,600 remain in the wild.

Australia

FAST FACTS

- **OFFICIAL NAME:** Commonwealth of Australia
- **FORM OF GOVERNMENT:** Federal parliamentary democracy; Commonwealth realm
- **CAPITAL:** Canberra
- **POPULATION:** 23,470,145
- **OFFICIAL LANGUAGE:** English
- **MONEY:** Australian dollar
- **AREA:** 2,969,906 square miles (7,692,024 square kilometers)
- **MAJOR MOUNTAIN RANGES:** Great Dividing Range, Macdonnell Ranges
- **MAJOR RIVERS:** Murray-Darling, Murrumbidgee, Lachlan



LEFT: AUSTRALIAN FLAG, RIGHT: AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR Photograph by Showface, Dreamstime

HISTORY

Aboriginal people arrived in Australia about 50,000 years ago. They may have traveled from Asia across land bridges that were exposed when sea levels were lower. The hardy Aborigines have learned to live in the harsh conditions of the outback.

Dutch explorers first landed in Australia in 1606, and the British began to settle there in 1788. Many settlers were criminals sent to live in Australia as punishment. For a short time, the newcomers lived peacefully with the Aboriginal people. But soon, fighting broke out over who owned the land.

In 1851, gold was discovered in Australia. A rush to find riches brought thousands of new immigrants, and by 1859, six separate colonies existed. In 1901, these colonies joined to form a British commonwealth.

NATURE

Australia's ecosystem is an unusual one because of its remote location. As a result, there are many animal species that occur here and nowhere else in the world, such as the platypus, kangaroo, echidna, and koala. Australia has 516 national parks to protect its unique plants and animals.

One of Australia's most amazing sites rises like an enormous whale's back from a flat red-soil desert called the Red Center. This site is called Uluru, and it is a sacred natural formation at the heart of the country. Rising 1,100 feet (335 meters) tall, it is the largest rock in the world!

Australia is home to many of the deadliest species of animals on the planet. There are 36 species of poisonous funnel-web spiders in eastern Australia. There are also 20 types of venomous snakes, including the taipan, which attacks without warning and bites repeatedly, killing its victim in minutes.

There are several types of rain forests in Australia. Tropical rain forests, mainly found in the northeast, are the richest in plant and animal species. Subtropical rain forests are found near the mid-eastern coast, and broadleaf rain forests grow in the southeast and on the island of Tasmania.

GEOGRAPHY



Australia is the only country in the world that covers an entire continent. It is one of the largest countries on Earth. Although it is rich in natural resources and has a lot of fertile land, more than one-third of Australia is desert.

Most Australian cities and farms are located in the southwest and southeast, where the climate is more comfortable. There are dense rain forests in the northeast. The famous outback (remote rural areas) contains the country's largest deserts, where there are scorching temperatures, little water, and almost no vegetation.

Running around the eastern and southeastern edge of Australia is the Great Dividing Range. This 2,300-mile (3,700-kilometer) stretch of mountain sends water down into Australia's most important rivers and the Great Artesian Basin, the largest groundwater source in the world.

Map created by National Geographic Maps

PEOPLE & CULTURE

Australia is one of the world's most ethnically diverse nations. Nearly a quarter of the people who live in Australia were born in other countries. They come from the United Kingdom and other European countries, but also from China, Vietnam, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Australia's warm, sunny climate and abundance of open spaces gives the population a love of the outdoors. The people are also passionate about sports, including swimming, surfing, sailing, tennis, soccer, cricket, rugby, and their own invention, Australian rules football.

GOVERNMENT

As a commonwealth of the United Kingdom, Australia's head of state is the British monarch. Many Australians think the country should end its ties to Britain and become a republic. In a vote in 1999, Australians decided against separating from the UK, but the vote was close, and the debate continues.

Australia is an important exporter of agricultural goods like wool, wheat, beef, fruit, and wine. The country is also rich in minerals and metals and is the world's fourth largest producer of gold.

